
CONSTRUCTING PUBLIC SCHOOLING TODAY: DERISION, MULTICULTURALISM, NATIONALISM

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ABSTRACT. In this article, Walter Parker brings structure and agency to the foreground of the current tumult of public schooling in the United States. He focuses on three structures that are serving as rules and resources for creative agency. These are a discourse of derision about failing schools, a broad mobilization of multiculturalism, and an enduring nationalism. Drawing on Anthony Giddens's structuration theory, Parker examines how these discourses figure in redefining school reform, redefining school curricula, and requiring schools once again to serve nationalistic purposes.

This is a study of change and stasis in a social system: public schooling in the United States today. I treat public schooling as a buzzing, contentious, "alive" site of social construction, and I examine three nodes of construction activity. The first is a discourse of derision — a stream of disdainful talk and action about public schooling, animated by the belief that public schooling is miserably broken but also that it is the one thing that can save our society. The second is a discourse of multiculturalism that, under the banners of "equal time" and "inclusion," encourages a perpetual expansion of the pantheon of American heroes celebrated in school textbooks and, sometimes, also permits religious teaching in the public school curriculum. The third is a resilient nationalism that suffuses even those curricular initiatives that we might suspect are beyond its grasp, such as global education. There are innumerable more nodes of construction activity, but these three are fertile and consequential, and each is making strange bedfellows of disparate agents and ideologies. Together, they may permit a glimpse into the making of public schooling today.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I do not rely on the conventional school change literature, insightful and helpful though it is,¹ but on a venerable strand of social theory that would have us see education as a social practice occurring at the intersection of social structure and social agency. Using this framework, we can zero in on the ways change agents work in, with, and around powerful social forces, and we are encouraged to avoid both structural determinism and romantic individualism. Anthony Giddens's structuration theory presents a meeting point of bottom-up human agency and top-down social force, of hermeneutics and structuralism.² It holds that social systems — here public schooling — are networks of social practices,

1. For example, Richard F. Elmore, *Restructuring Schools: The Next Generation of Educational Reform* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990); and Michael Fullan, *Change Forces: Probing the Depths of Educational Reform* (London: Falmer, 1993).

2. Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984).

and that these social practices are always in process. They are constructed, yes, but under construction, too. Recursively, they are received, constructed, remodeled, and given back. In this sense, a social system is not a composite of static and external social structures. Rather, it has what Giddens calls “structural properties” — rules and resources — that are appropriated, knowledgeably, by individuals in the production and reproduction of social action and everyday life.³ “Structure,” he argues, “is always both constraining and enabling.” He continues,

Analysing the structuration of social systems means studying the modes in which such systems, grounded in the knowledgeable activities of situated actors who draw upon rules and resources in the diversity of action contexts, are produced and reproduced in interaction.⁴

Accordingly, in contrast to a deterministic model of social systems,⁵ we have a more holistic, lively, and less predictable process in which dominance is given neither to structure nor to agency. Structure retains its strong reproductive bias — its power to shape social practices — but human actors knowledgeably and willfully engage it. Such a model not only accommodates individual adaptation and innovation but requires it. “Structure is dynamic,” William Sewell concludes in his well-known gloss on structuration theory. “It is the continually evolving outcome and matrix of a process of social interaction.”⁶ Outcome and matrix are effect and cause, consequence and medium, product and procedure. Social structures and the agency of human actors, then, are not opposed to one another but constitute one another. Subjectivity is formed by structures, yet subjects respond uniquely to their circumstances. As Karl Marx put it, “Men make history but not in circumstances of their own making.”⁷

Put differently, agents have what Frederick Erickson calls “wiggle room” — space to act within and around constraints.⁸ Human actors are not entirely ventriloquated by structures; they are not puppets or mere epiphenomena. Erickson’s interest lies in sampling the innumerable situations in which social life is created. He wants to avoid erring on the side of determinism where such situations are treated only as “downstream” of large-scale, long-term, deep, powerful social forces, and, thus, where there is little to no possibility of innovative

3. *Ibid.*, 17.

4. *Ibid.*, 25.

5. For example, see Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

6. William H. Sewell, Jr., “A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation,” *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 1 (1992): 27.

7. Quoted in Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, xxi.

8. Frederick Erickson, *Talk and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 196.

bricolage — no wiggle room in which agents work with and against the current. But he also wants to avoid erring on the side of individualism and voluntarism, where human actors are unconstrained agents who can easily swim “upstream” against the current, altering structures with their choices and actions by virtue of their gumption and cleverness. In his analyses of the speaking and listening of local social actors, Erickson finds examples of rule following and situated adaptation that defy strong upstream or downstream explanations. “Neither a ‘top-down’ explanation for the maintenance of the status quo through social reproduction, nor a ‘bottom-up’ explanation for social change is by itself adequate,” he writes.⁹ Circumstances are both predetermined by antecedent structures and alive with possibility and improvisation. Human actors find themselves enmeshed in conditions not of their choosing, as objects succumbing to them, and also as subjects playing, in their own way, the hand of cards they were dealt, taking practical action with and against the surrounding structures — gender, race, capitalism, federalism, and heteronormativity, to name some global examples. Erickson’s term “wiggle room” is apt, for it implies constraint while allowing movement. When looking into the tumult of public schooling today, we are thereby encouraged to attend to both constraint and affordance, and not to gloss over one in favor of the other.

To clarify a bit further the conceptual framework I am using, I turn to the work of Ian Hacking. Hacking demonstrates that treating a phenomenon as a construct positions it analytically as the upshot “of historical events, social forces, and ideology.”¹⁰ It is, then, neither prediscursive nor inevitable. As such, public schooling can be investigated as a contingent and currently still-developing realm of social action that includes a thicket of practices (for example, teaching, taking roll, parent night, summer vacation, (under)funding, curriculum decision making, sports teams, and so on), the built-up material world (school buildings, books, wall maps, playgrounds, metal detectors, and the like), and emotions (such as boredom, urgency, hope, and fear). This assemblage satisfies Hacking’s condition for claiming that something is a social construct, that “X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable.”¹¹ But Hacking, like Giddens, is a structurationist. He is interested in the interaction of classifications of people and the people thus classified. He is especially interested in “the ways in which those who are classified, and who are altered by being so classified, also change in ways that cause systems of classification be modified in turn.”¹² He calls this the *looping effect* of classifying human beings. It exemplifies structuration.

9. Ibid., 197.

10. Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), 2.

11. Ibid., 6.

12. Ian Hacking, “Between Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman: Between Discourse in the Abstract and Face-to-Face Interaction,” *Economy and Society* 33, no. 3 (2004): 279.

By these lights, we can view the public school system as a concrete site of structuration and change, a particular system of contact points between structure and agency. My purpose here is to peer into this system — the current cultural formation of public schooling — and to identify nodes of construction work. If public schooling is being made anew before our very eyes, my question is this: what and who are making it now?

I center my discussion of the first structuring force, derision, on Diane Ravitch's recent reversal. She retains her belief that public schools are terribly broken, but has changed her mind about the cause and solution. I focus my discussion of the second structuring force, multiculturalism, on Jonathan Zimmerman's study of curriculum contention in the school subjects.¹³ He finds multiple avenues of controversy, not a single overarching "culture war." For the third, nationalism, I draw on my own study of the international education movement in public schools today. In the first, we see a drumbeat of criticism leveled against public schools with the consequence that "school reform" is structured in a particular way. Also, we see a well-positioned agent who helped to construct "school reform" in this way now resisting it. In the second, we see that multiculturalism structures curriculum contention in such a way that the maxim "celebrate diversity" is appropriated by creative agents in unpredictable ways; for example, it is used as a resource both for broadening the pantheon of heroes included in textbooks (this is the predictable pattern) and, less predictably, for inserting religious teachings into the curriculum. In the third, we shall see how nationalism structures even the new "international" public schools cropping up around the country, and how creative agents are finding and using wiggle room within them.

A DISCOURSE OF DERISION

Diane Ravitch has written another book about how schooling in the United States is failing and what can be done about it. The book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*, is of special interest because, in it, Ravitch recants. She tells us that she has taken John Maynard Keynes's advice: "When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?"¹⁴ She then provides a welcome and articulate critique of the "school reform" matrix in which we find ourselves today and that she helped to inscribe. She now swims upstream against currents that she was instrumental in producing. Her wiggle room is constrained by structuring forces of her own making.

Ravitch is a historian of education whose books include *The Troubled Crusade, The Schools We Deserve, What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* (with Chester Finn,

13. Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002).

14. Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 2.

Jr.), and *Left Back*.¹⁵ She became an educational policymaker in conservative circles and served as assistant secretary of education from 1991 to 1993 in President George H.W. Bush's administration. She admits that hers has been a view from afar: "I began . . . looking at schools and teachers from an altitude of 20,000 feet and seeing them as objects to be moved around by big ideas and great plans."¹⁶

Her histories are widely read. Because she has enjoyed a seat close to individuals and organizations with power, and because there is a great appetite in this nation for bad news about schools, her histories have had far-reaching effects. Her own agency has helped create the structuring forces with which she now contends. Most centrally, she has been the chief architect for constructing the belief that the American school system is broken. The result is a drumbeat of derision and, now, a bipartisan consensus — a new common sense or contagious belief so widespread that, as one long-time observer put it, "People will believe anything you say about public schooling as long as it is bad."¹⁷ A case in point: At a fund-raising banquet for a celebrated public school in Seattle, Washington, one that had been transformed into an "international school," I listened to the master of ceremonies, who was the chief officer of a prominent corporation, introduce the school's outstanding principal. As he did so, he reminded the audience that this was a *public* school. Incredulous himself, he paused and repeated it: "A *public* school. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Because it has become what Harold Garfinkel called a "background expectancy," the discourse of derision is difficult to detect.¹⁸ Even more difficult is to see that it is a social construct, "that X need not have existed."¹⁹ As Hacking explains, incredulity often indicates a reified or naturalized construct. But until recently, according to David Tyack and Larry Cuban, "citizens thought that public schools were good and getting better."²⁰ In a 1946 poll, 40 percent could think of nothing wrong with the schools. "Nothing." The same was true in 1938.

15. Diane Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education 1945–1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); Diane Ravitch, *The Schools We Deserve* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn, Jr., *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know? A Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature* (New York: HarperCollins, 1987); and Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

16. Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, 10.

17. Gerald W. Bracey, *Education Hell: Rhetoric vs. Reality* (Alexandria, Virginia: Educational Research Service, 2009), 39. On this use of "common sense," see Clifford Geertz, "Common Sense as a Cultural System," in *Local Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 73–93.

18. Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 36.

19. Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* 6. The following anecdote exemplifies this difficulty: When I tell friends that I am examining the belief that public schools are broken, they reply, "You mean they aren't?"

20. David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 13.

When asked, "If you were running the school in this community, what changes would you make?" 24 percent of respondents answered "None," and 29 percent gave no answer. "None." Opinions began to change after World War II, when high school graduation and, soon, some college education became necessary (with notable exceptions) to achieve economic success and social status. After 1969, Tyack and Cuban continue, "criticisms of education mushroomed [and] polls revealed lower rankings of the schools and of teachers year by year."²¹ In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released its report with a title that exemplifies this shift in attitude toward education: *A Nation at Risk*. There was widespread cultural resonance for the report's claim that the "mediocrity" of our schools was pervasive and profound. This claim was palatable. So mediocre was our school system, according to this hyperbolic derision, that had it been imposed by "an unfriendly foreign power, we might well have viewed it as an act of war."²²

One way to penetrate this discourse is to notice that it rests on an urgent *crisis-and-salvation* narrative. The crisis story is that the nation is in a calamitous situation because schools are failing to educate students. The salvation story is that schools can rescue the nation. It is a simple formula. It has been called our "education gospel."²³ Its key premise is that the school system is the cause of our problems *and* is capable of saving society. Schooling is not seen as embedded in society, mirroring and largely reproducing it, but rather as an independent arena above the fray. The historian Lawrence Cremin, Ravitch's mentor at Columbia, called this a "device" that repeatedly has been used in the United States.²⁴ It was used by proponents of vocational education early in the twentieth century, by the post-Sputnik proponents of math and science education in the 1950s, by *A Nation at Risk* in the 1980s, and, most recently, in the policies of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. The recurrence of this theme is illustrated by a review of Ravitch's book published in the *Boston Globe*, which unwittingly begins, "Ever since Sputnik it's been common knowledge that the American educational system is on the verge of disaster."²⁵ Common knowledge! Disaster! The problem is set, and the only question is how to clean up the mess.

The upshot has been to lay the burden of the nation's knowledge quotient and international competitiveness at the schoolhouse door. The device is tidy, simple, and illusory. In fact, the school system is not autonomous, capable of structuring

21. Ibid.

22. National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), 1.

23. See David Labaree, "Consuming the Public School," in this issue. See also W. Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson, *The Education Gospel: The Economic Power of Schooling* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004); and Seymour B. Sarason, *Schooling in America: Scapegoat and Salvation* (New York: Free Press, 1983.)

24. Lawrence A. Cremin, *Popular Education and Its Discontents* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 103.

25. Kate Tuttle, "Little Dead Schoolhouse," *Boston Globe*, February 28, 2010; http://articles.boston.com/2010-02-28/ae/29324542_1_diane-ravitch-education-plan-education-historian.

society. The school system is more society's caboose than its engine. Contrary to George Counts's famous declaration of 1932, the schools *cannot* build a new social order.²⁶ The most creative educators do not have that much wiggle room. This is not to say that schools themselves, as organizations, or that the human actors in them have no agency in relation to the broader social structures that shape them. What schools and educators do matters, which is why school improvement matters. But because schools are embedded in a broader matrix of structuring forces, not suspended above it, they are constrained. To contend that education problems can be solved by educational reform, Cremin argued, "especially educational reform *defined solely as school reform*, is not merely utopian and millennialist, it is at best a foolish and at worst a crass effort to direct attention away from those truly responsible for doing something."²⁷ Who, then, *is* responsible? According to Cremin, those responsible include Congress, corporation managers, and a number of federal departments — the political economy of the nation.

In *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, Ravitch does not recant her schools-are-broken story. I make this point not only because so much of the book's press and reviews seem to suggest that she has recanted in full, but also because the habit of derision may undermine the arguments she makes now. For the sake of clarity, therefore, I specify here what she does recant.

She begins with this: "My views changed as I saw how these ideas were working out in reality."²⁸ Which ideas? Privatizing education, charter schools, school choice, testing, and accountability. Ravitch was both a leader and a follower in the movement that brought all of this about. "I got caught up in the rising tide of enthusiasm for choice in education," she writes. "I was swept along by my immersion in the upper reaches of the first Bush presidency, where choice and competition were taken for granted as successful ways to improve student achievement."²⁹ She was swept along both by the Reagan-Bush market ideology and the "reinventing government" rhetoric of President Bill Clinton's "third way" — a path between the orthodoxies of the left and the right. The die was cast for a bipartisan consensus to emerge in the era of the second Bush's No Child Left Behind and continuing with Obama's Race to the Top. Platforms that "had once been the exclusive property of the conservative wing of the Republican party since Ronald Reagan's presidency had somehow managed to captivate education thinkers in the Democratic Party as well."³⁰

What is important to grasp, as Ravitch does, is that school reform itself became characterized in a certain way — as "accountability, high-stakes testing,

26. George S. Counts, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* (New York: John Day, 1932).

27. Cremin, *Popular Education and Its Discontents*, 103. See also David C. Berliner and Bruce J. Biddle, *The Manufactured Crisis* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1995).

28. Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, 2.

29. *Ibid.*, 127.

30. *Ibid.*, 22.

data-driven decision making, choice, charter schools, privatization, deregulation, merit pay, and competition among schools. Whatever could not be measured did not count."³¹ This is what "school reform" came to mean and now means even in casual use. Ravitch provides a telling example of what this means in practice: She explains that when Linda Darling-Hammond was considered for the position of secretary of education in President Barack Obama's administration, a chorus of criticism warned him not to choose her but instead to select a "real" school reformer: a system outsider. Darling-Hammond is an educator and educational researcher, not a professional athlete or banker, and she is known as an advocate of teacher professionalism and a critic of Teach for America.

This is school reform, the construct, in the United States today. This is the cultural formation around, through, in concert with, and up against which educational agency moves today. And this is what Ravitch now refutes — this narrow, entrenched, bipartisan understanding of and platform for school reform.

In her shared *Education Week* blog with progressive educator Deborah Meier, "Bridging Differences," Ravitch wrote, "My hope for the book is that it will provoke a counteroffensive against misguided policies . . . now embedded in No Child Left Behind and the Race to the Top."³² What she may not yet grasp is that the school crisis she has imagined, the idea of a horribly broken public school system, is both an exaggeration and an oversimplification. There is some truth in the crisis narrative, of course; our education system could be better in many crucial ways: curriculum, instruction, student achievement, equity, financing, respect for students and teachers, and more. But in the decades years that have followed *A Nation at Risk*, and despite its dire prognosis, the economy of the United States has soared, and its schools and colleges have produced the "lion's share of the world's best students."³³ As Yong Zhao shows, Chinese schools are trying to become more like ours, not less.³⁴

The discourse of derision does not aid the quest to improve schools; it impedes it. The reason is that the "solutions" it spawns are overwrought with urgency, certainty, and millennialism. The door is thrown open, therefore, to red herrings and silver bullets. Most important, schools are blamed for not solving problems that are well beyond their reach. They are expected to "close the achievement gap," which they did not cause and are in no position to solve. Similarly, they are expected to solve the nation's twenty-first century "competitiveness" problem. Without an understanding — on the ground, not at 20,000 feet — that the crisis-and-salvation narrative does not serve school reform, Ravitch's tenacious search for a solution may worsen the problem that she is

31. *Ibid.*, 21.

32. Diane Ravitch, "Today Is Publication Day," Bridging Differences blog at *Education Week*; http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/Bridging-Differences/2010/03/today_is_publication_day.html.

33. Hal Salzman and Lindsay Lowell, "Making the Grade," *Nature* 453, no. 7191 (2008): 28.

34. Yong Zhou, *Catching Up or Leading the Way: American Education in the Age of Globalization* (Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2009).

trying to solve. She is empowered by the reputation she gained while creating the constraints that she now battles against, and she now uses that reputation as a resource to oppose the rules she helped to write. But the underlying “device” is untouched.

MULTICULTURALISM UNBOUND

New York playwright Aaron Loeb has a 4-year-old son in preschool and a new play called *Abraham Lincoln's Big, Gay Dance Party*. Loeb's play imagines the trial of an Illinois teacher who inserted an earnest plea for gay rights into the mouths of elementary school children at the Christmas pageant. Loeb told the *New York Times* that parent night at his son's preschool and his new play have this in common: “Schools have become the place to engage in cultural warfare.”³⁵ Other thespians agree. A new staging of *Julius Caesar* by Hamilton Clancy relocates that drama from ancient Rome to a contemporary school system in the United States.³⁶ The besieged ruler is now a reformist school administrator murdered by unsupportive parents and teachers.

These new plays signal the enduring and now intensifying battles over the public school curriculum. What undergirds this contention and why the intensification?³⁷ The discourse of derision and crisis plays a major role. Its sweeping angst mobilizes a sense of urgency — the need to “clean up the mess” before our society is further crippled — while drawing attention away from deeply rooted structuring forces such as unequal school funding, a high child poverty rate, and institutional racism. But there is more. I will quickly survey three hypotheses regarding the source of these curriculum battles and then consider Zimmerman's study.

Walter Lippmann wrote in 1928 that “all the important national groups of which we are composed have their eye on the schools.” Indeed,

the struggles for the control of the schools are among the bitterest political struggles which now divide the nations. . . . Wherever two or more groups within a state differ in religion, or in language or nationality, the immediate concern of each group is to use the schools to preserve its own faith and tradition. For it is in the school that the child is drawn towards or drawn away from the religion and the patriotism of its parents.³⁸

Hannah Arendt, like Horace Mann a century earlier, believed that public education in the United States played “a different and, politically, incomparably more important role” than in other nations. The reason, she wrote, can be found in the

35. Quoted in David Rooney, “The Culture Wars Shift to School Halls,” *New York Times*, July 18, 2010, Arts & Leisure: 4–5.

36. “The Drilling Company Presents: Julius Caesar in a Modern School Board,” *NY.com* (July 4, 2010), <http://www.ny.com/buzz/entry/the-drilling-company-presents-julius-caesar-in-a-modern-school-board>.

37. “Contentious curricula” is Amy Binder's term in a fine multiple-case study: *Contentious Curricula: Afrocentrism and Creationism in American Public Schools* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002).

38. Walter Lippmann, *American Inquisitors: A Commentary on Dayton and Chicago* (Piscataway, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1993), 22–23.

role “that continuous immigration plays in the country’s political consciousness and frame of mind.”³⁹ The “common school” would shape the “common person,” but there was no easy route to defining this construct “common.” In the nativism of the 1920s, for example, when Lippmann wrote, groups such as the Ku Klux Klan opposed foreign-language instruction in public schools. Now, upstream forces have shifted and foreign language instruction is galvanizing a new “international education” movement in public schools, as I will discuss in the next section.

From Lippmann we have a diminishing-parental-authority hypothesis and from Arendt an anxiety-about-national-identity hypothesis. Richard Rothstein offers another: Because our political economy is a free-market democracy, “schools are, by far, the largest *public* activity in which we engage. . . . At the local level, schools are virtually the only institution about which we can fight in the public arena.”⁴⁰ The pent up fears and divisions of “we the people” are funneled into that small, remaining space. As the parent and playwright Loeb said, public schools have become the place to engage in cultural warfare. They are the primary sites of struggle over the political and cultural shaping of the next generation and the reimagining of key social categories — no less than the nation, citizenship, and culture.

A 2010 case that galvanized popular attention nationwide was the decision of the Texas State Board of Education to revise the history curriculum to include more conservative political information and ideology. Ronald Reagan was emphasized, Thomas Jefferson was de-emphasized, Joseph McCarthy was treated more sympathetically, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was recast as driven by Islamic fundamentalism. The Texas Board decision is broadly consequential because Texas curriculum decisions are made at the state rather than the local district level; also, because the Texas market is large, textbook publishers across the nation cannot ignore its wishes and remain solvent. The decision, then, is a new rule that will structure what school teachers do in Texas and beyond. But, it is also a resource. California legislator Leland Yee promptly drafted a bill to keep the Texas standards out of California’s curriculum. According to Yee:

While some Texas politicians may want to set their educational standards back 50 years, California should not be subject to their backward curriculum changes. The alterations and fallacies made by these extremist conservatives are offensive to our communities and inaccurate of our nation’s diverse history. Today, California spoke with a bipartisan voice that our kids should be provided an education based on facts and that embraces our multicultural nation.⁴¹

At the end of the statement, we have Senator Yee’s appropriation of multiculturalism, using it as a resource against the conservative revisionism and monoculturalism of the Texas Board. He uses the Texas rule to advance

39. Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” *Partisan Review* 25, no. 4 (1958): 494.

40. Richard Rothstein, *Out of Balance: Our Understanding of How Schools Affect Society and How Society Affects Schools* (Chicago: Spencer Foundation, 2002).

41. Quoted in Robin Hindery, “Calif. Bill Would Block Texas Textbook Changes,” *Mercury News*, May 16, 2010, para. 8.

an opposing California rule, and he does so by riding the upstream wave of multiculturalism. Here is a knowledgeable actor finding wiggle room and using it.

But Yee's mobilization of multiculturalism from the left in order to challenge Texas's new policy from the right does not represent multiculturalism's sweep as a rule and resource in education. Conservatives as well as liberals have been deploying multiculturalism for a long time and across a spectrum of initiatives. To explain this expanded use of multiculturalism, I turn to Jonathan Zimmerman's study, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools*.⁴² Public schools have been "ground zero" for multicultural contests for at least a century, Zimmerman shows, and he makes two contributions to our understanding of curriculum contention in public schools. First, he develops a bifurcated theory of the "culture war" construct in education. Rather than a monolithic liberal/conservative tension, or a liberal/radical tension, or an educated elites/ignorant masses tension — rather than any of these overarching tensions, Zimmerman finds two persistent tensions.

One is "the road from Chicago." It centers on Chicago Mayor "Big Bill" Thompson's attack in 1927 on history textbooks adopted by then-Superintendent William McAndrew. Thompson called the texts "treasonous" and "un-American." The books were authored by the renowned progressive historians Charles and Mary Beard, David Muzzey, and others.⁴³ Thompson charged in 1927 that their textbooks got the American Revolution wrong and maligned its true heroes. The Beards wrote that the Revolution was fought not simply to win independence from the British, but more importantly to determine who would rule in America. The authors of the U.S. Constitution were concerned more with their own economic interests than with the political principles by which a democracy might be designed. Mayor Thompson interpreted this not as a socialist interpretation, or even "progressive," but as pro-Anglo and anti-immigrant. Thompson's "true heroes," as it happened, were non-Anglo, and he drew most of his support from the Irish and German communities in Chicago. "I will never rest," he said, "until the histories used in the Chicago public schools are purged of their pro-British propaganda."⁴⁴ The largest Catholic organization, the Knights of Columbus, joined the fray. "Americans, Wake up," began a leaflet:

Our history is being distorted and polluted and our children thereby de-Americanized. The achievements of the many different races — Irish, German, Italian, French, Scandinavian, Slavik, Polish, Spanish, etc. in founding, developing, and maintaining the institutions of this country are treated with contempt to the glory of England — the age-long, implacable foe of America.⁴⁵

This was not a Texas-style, Bible Belt, conservative attack on perceived liberal propaganda in school textbooks, but an urban, multicultural attack on pro-Anglo

42. Zimmerman, *Whose America?*

43. Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York: Knopf, 1968).

44. Quoted in Zimmerman, *Whose America?* 9.

45. Quoted in Zimmerman, *Whose America?* 20.

propaganda. Along this road, Zimmerman shows, lies our enduring conflict over patriotism, ethnicity, and national identity in the schools.

The other is “the road from Dayton” — Dayton, Tennessee — where the state’s law against teaching evolution in the schools was upheld by a local court after a celebrity-studded trial in 1925 over the guilt of John T. Scopes. Scopes had defied Tennessee’s law prohibiting the teaching of evolution. He was defended by American Civil Liberties Union lawyer Clarence Darrow, and the schools were represented by a team that included the famed orator and frequent Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan. In the world-famous “monkey trial,” Scopes was found guilty and fined \$100. The judgment was appealed and upheld by the Tennessee Supreme Court. Darrow believed the trial would be remembered along with the Salem witchcraft trials three centuries earlier. Bryan believed he was defending fundamentalism against moderate Protestantism.

The contention certainly did not evaporate with the conclusion of this trial, although across the nation, due to local control of schools, there often has been a kind of live-and-let-live multicultural truce. For a while, the “released time” system permitted religious instruction in the schools, but let students choose the faith or opt out altogether. In the 1960s, the Supreme Court banned organized prayer and Bible reading at school, which brought released time to an end. But in the 1980s, Christian conservatives began to demand not “released time” but “equal time” for biblical accounts of creation alongside scientific accounts. Early in the 1980s, Louisiana state senator Bill Keith authored what became the “Balanced Treatment for Creation-Science and Evolution-Science in Public School Instruction Act.” In this way, multiculturalism was broadened as a construct to include curriculum currently excluded. This discourse of inclusion and equal time, at least in the Louisiana case, was found unconstitutional in *Edwards v. Aguillard*.⁴⁶ The Supreme Court ruled that the law was intended to advance the doctrines of a particular religion in schools, thereby violating the establishment clause of the First Amendment.

Zimmerman shows that the enduring conflicts over patriotism and religion often intersect and overlap, but are nonetheless distinct analytical and empirical pathways of curriculum contention. More important for our purposes here, however, he shows that agents on both roads appropriated the discourse of multiculturalism in order to win “inclusion” and “equal time” in school in the context of a broader campaign against “discrimination” at school. To protect devout Christian youth from suffering “discrimination” in schools, conservatives began to press for restoration of organized prayer in the classroom. This takes us to Zimmerman’s second contribution.

Zimmerman argues that the perpetual broadening of the canon — the inclusion of previously excluded groups and causes — did not raise learning

46. *Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 U.S. 578 (1987).

standards in education but only added to them. He shows that curriculum efforts aimed at recognizing and tolerating diversity did not result in the teaching of critical history but only in the inclusion of every group's heroes. There was no resulting inquiry into what America could be or rival hypotheses about race, class, or the founders' intent, for example. "America" remained a "talisman" — a sacred icon that none dare criticize or demean. The pantheon has been continually broadened (what James Banks calls the "additive" approach⁴⁷), but an attitude of reverence and adherence to a celebratory grand narrative of American progress were maintained.

"Diversity and critical history both remain worthy goals," Zimmerman writes, but "we should resist the easy presupposition that one will spawn the other."⁴⁸ Certainly, the first has not spawned the second. Accordingly, a broad, banal, celebratory multiculturalism became an entrenched feature of public schooling early on and remains a powerful structuring force today. There was on the patriotic road "the progressive inclusion of more and more Americans in the grand national story,"⁴⁹ without that story itself being subjected to investigation. And there was on the religious road the strategic deployment of multiculturalism for the sake of "inclusion" and "diversity." Multiculturalism thus structures public education not only as the right's feared canon-buster, but also as a strategy for resolving curriculum contention in favor of right-wing challengers to the curricular status quo. Additional heroes and groups are brought into the curriculum — most recently, Reagan has been inducted into the hall of fame — while anti-evolution groups demand, and sometimes are given, "fair play," "equal time," "balance," and "inclusion." The creative appropriation of multiculturalism as a resource by agents across the political spectrum is surely one of the most intriguing themes of curriculum contention over the past century. Meanwhile, the persistence of uncritical history suggests that multiculturalism is tied to an even deeper and more enduring structure in public schooling: nationalism.

NATIONALISM UNBOWED

In academic and professional educational settings in the United States today, the phrases "our global economy," "our increasingly interconnected world," "global citizens," and so forth are uttered with abandon. Hearing these slogans, audiences nod their heads knowingly. In tandem, over the past fifteen years in Seattle, Los Angeles, San Antonio, New York, Denver, and other urban districts in the United States, a number of public schools have been changing their names and, ostensibly, their missions in the direction of "internationalization." In Seattle, for example, an old elementary school closed for remodeling and reopened in 2000 with "international" in its name. It features partial dual-language immersion: students spend half their school day in English and half in

47. James A. Banks, *An Introduction to Multicultural Education*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2008).

48. Zimmerman, *Whose America?* 31.

49. *Ibid.*, 3.

one other language (Spanish or Japanese). Ever since instituting these changes, the school has had a waiting list. Subsequently, a city high school was divided into several "small schools" with the aid of a Gates Foundation grant, and one of them opened in 2002 as the Seattle Global Studies Academy. This school adopted a new curriculum that emphasized "global leadership" alongside English language learning (ELL). With the help of local nonprofit organizations, study-abroad programs were initiated. Next, a middle school — not far from the elementary school described previously — inserted "international" in its name and implemented three curricular foci: second-language study, "global perspective" education, and international artist residencies. Recently, two more elementary schools have added "international" to their names and launched curricula similar to that of the first, except that Mandarin has replaced Japanese; and another city high school has added "international" to its name.

These are not unusual happenings. A new "international education" (IE) movement is under way in school districts across the United States. There are networks of new "international" schools, calls to action, prizes for excellence in international education, and an array of nongovernmental organizations providing advice, materials, and programs.⁵⁰

These developments raise a number of questions. What is this movement and what change does it want to bring to public schools? What curriculum work is it doing and toward what ends? Most interesting for our present purposes: Is nationalism, which is one of the chief structuring forces of public school systems everywhere in the world, somehow *not* structuring this movement?⁵¹ In other words, is nationalism, which possesses such formidable depth, power, and reproductive durability, somehow making room for a variant of public schooling that does not bolster national identity?

In a series of studies, I found a jumble of meanings and programs aimed in different directions and serving different interests.⁵² There is hope (for example, for students who will come to know and care not only about Americans but peoples everywhere), fear (for instance, of the United States losing its competitiveness

50. For an example of an international schools network, see The International Studies Schools Network of the Asia Society; of a call to action, see Council of Chief State School Officers, *Putting the World into World-Class Education* (Washington, D.C.: Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008); of prizes, see the Goldman Sachs Foundation Prizes for Excellence in International Education, awarded by the Asia Society; and of NGOs offering support, see Global Visionaries (www.global-visionaries.org), Facing the Future (www.facingthefuture.org), and the Asia Society (www.asiasociety.org).

51. See Nancy Beadie, "Education, Social Capital, and State Formation in Comparative Historical Perspective," *Pedagogica Historica* 46, no. 1–2 (2010): 15–32; and Andy Green, *Education and State Formation* (London: Macmillan, 1990).

52. Walter C. Parker, "'International Education' in U.S. Public Schools," *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 9, no. 3–4 (2011); Walter C. Parker and Steven P. Camicia, "Cognitive Praxis in Today's 'International Education' Movement: A Case Study of Intentions and Affinities," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 37, no. 1 (2009): 42–74; and Katharyne Mitchell and Walter C. Parker, "I Pledge Allegiance To . . . Flexible Citizenship and Shifting Scales of Belonging," *Teachers College Record* 110, no. 4 (2008): 775–804.

on a new “flat” playing field), and the familiar crisis-and-salvation narrative. A mixture of strong and weak discourses of “international education” compete for funding and attention by parents, officials, business roundtable members, nonprofit organizations, and media. Nationalism is structuring the “international education” movement — it has the competitive advantage, so to speak — but bottom-up, downstream initiatives are at play, too, and they attract at least some attention from pockets of agents who work closer to the ground of school practice.

But the key structuring force in the contemporary IE movement is, counter-intuitively, nationalism. It has two dimensions: national economic security and national military security. The economic way to secure the nation is to improve its economic competitiveness with other nations — maintaining it or regaining it if it already has been lost. The military way to secure the nation is to strengthen its armed forces, including the intelligence communities that function in and with them. In both dimensions, a problem is framed (flatworld and terror, respectively), a corresponding solution is identified (school reform), and anxieties are mobilized to create a sense of urgency and an array of planning and action.⁵³

The national security discourse and the discourse of derision together structure the IE movement. This is demonstrated in the following statement trumpeting a school reform project called by the grandly martial name “Operation Public Education.” It is geared to “transforming America’s schools” so as to respond to “the challenge of human capital development” in the intensely competitive “level playing field of the global economy”:

Terrorism and the war in Iraq are high on the list of the nation’s concerns, but the greatest danger facing America is, as [former IBM chairman] Louis Gerstner recognized, the challenge of human capital development. Our nation’s public schools, the foundation for this effort, are still failing far too many of our children despite an investment of some \$500 billion annually.⁵⁴

The author, an advisor to the secretary of education in George W. Bush’s administration, continued by reminding readers that, “sadly, we’ve known about this threat for quite some time.” His reference point was the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, which laid out Cremin’s “device”: schools caused the crisis and schools can solve it.

Alongside the strong national security discourse, I found weak discourses at the margins, jockeying for position. They express agency close to the ground of school practice — well below the power-and-funding heights — and contain different problem-and-solution frames. Inside the re-missioned public schools that I observed and in interviews with movement activists, I found three such discourses. There are others (for example, peace studies and initiatives centered on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), but these three emerged as the

53. On frame analysis, see Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, eds., *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

54. Theodore Hershberg, “Value-Added Assessment and Systemic Reform: A Response to the Challenge of Human Capital Development,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 87, no. 4 (2005): 276.

most prominent contrasts to the discourse of national security. Significantly, none engaged the discourse of derision, as that discourse seems bent on serving national security interests. One, *global perspective*, gives IE a transnational cultural meaning; another, *cosmopolitanism*, gives it a transnational political meaning; a third, *international student body*, gives it a cultural meaning again, but in a decidedly student-centered way. The following are very brief sketches of each of these discourses:

- In *global perspective* discourse, multiculturalism is rescaled from the nation to the globe, and some attention is paid to global connections and systems. Historically, this derives from an earlier wave of global education in the schools in the 1960s and 1970s.⁵⁵
- In *cosmopolitanism* discourse, schools shift students' primary allegiance from the nation to the human family and Earth — from national citizen to global citizen. This is an ancient Greco-Roman idea that was recently revived and popularized by Martha Nussbaum.⁵⁶
- The *international student body* discourse emphasizes that immigration is putting the world into the classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, and playgrounds of public schools today. Seizing the opportunity, an "international" school is formed on the basis of its "international" students.

Of these, cosmopolitanism has the least wiggle room in relation to the strong discourse of national security; the global perspective and international student body discourses have the most. Cosmopolitanism is subject to intense debate and outright rejection by the dominant national security discourse. To take just one example, in voting against House Bill 266 in the Utah state legislature — a bill that would provide more funding for the International Baccalaureate (IB) program in Utah's schools — Senator Margaret Dayton said she is "opposed to the anti-American philosophy that's somehow woven into all the classes as they [IB courses] promote the U.N. agenda." Here she bathes the extremely moderate IB curriculum in a nationalistic discourse of derision. Aligning herself with the economic dimension of the national security discourse and setting herself squarely against cosmopolitanism, Senator Dayton clarified, "I would like to have *American citizens* who know how to function in a global economy, not *global citizens*."⁵⁷

The global perspective and international student body discourses, in tandem, stand a better chance of challenging to some extent, or perhaps merely surviving, the dominant nationalistic tide in the IE movement. They have the most wiggle room because both are easily partnered with, and able to mobilize as resources, the

55. That wave's manifesto was Robert G. Hanvey's *An Attainable Global Perspective* (New York: Center for Global Perspectives, 1978).

56. Martha C. Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism," in *For Love of Country?* ed. Joshua Cohen (Boston: Beacon, 2002), 4–17.

57. Quoted in Ben Fulton, "Students Say Good Things About IB," *Salt Lake Tribune*, February 23, 2008, para. 10.

instrumentalism of the national security discourse and the urgency of the schools-are-broken discourse. Both can present themselves as promising solutions to the existential threats to the nation posed by globalization and terror, and both can be promoted as innovations that can help fix the broken school system. Moreover, both already are comfortably nested in the banal multiculturalism featured in the prior section. They can use its politically acceptable rhetoric of inclusion and “celebrating diversity” as a resource. Positioned under the protective wing of the national security discourse, both manage to wiggle some distance away from the national container: global perspective toward the world at large, and international student body to the world at home — that is, to the “glocal” scene of the underfunded and overstressed urban public school.

Of the three, the international student body discourse displays the most creative use of wiggle room. I found this discourse only in public “international” high schools serving high-need students in funding-starved urban areas — places where race, poverty, migration, and formal education intersect institutionally. The foundation of this discourse of IE is twofold: (1) the demographic composition of the school (immigrant students, some of them refugees, are adding a new kind of diversity to the school’s already majority-minority student body) in combination with (2) the funding-starved, poverty-impacted context of the urban public high school. School leaders capitalize on the international student body, using it as a resource, and claim to have an “international” school because of it. This is a student-centered approach, both by necessity and by a progressive pedagogy centered on culturally responsive teaching. The dearth of curriculum materials and the absence of either positive media buzz or a waiting list of students seeking admission create the necessity. And, as the superintendent of an urban school district told me in an interview, the goal “is making students and teachers aware of the diversity within their midst and finding ways to help them value that and trace that to wherever it originated.”⁵⁸ English language learning continues to be a central focus, but now second language learning is highlighted as a central school mission as well; furthermore, ELL is reframed as IE. The extraordinary stresses on such schools — structural inequality, the discourse of derision, institutional racism — contribute to this reframing. Lacking other resources beyond the students themselves, IE is deployed to mobilize enthusiasm, corporate gifts, and media attention. As one parent activist said, the goal is “to attract market share back to the public schools,” and the “international” moniker does that, at least to some degree.

None of the three marginal discourses maneuvers far from the national security discourse. Writing in 1937 between the two world wars, in a volume titled *International Understanding Through the School Curriculum*, Isaac Kandel articulated an assertion made in the first section of this essay — that schools *cannot* build a new social order because they do not have that much room to wiggle in relation to nationalism. Kandel cautioned that an “international education” that wants to be more than national security education operating

58. Parker, “‘International Education’ in U.S. Public Schools.”

under an assumed name will have to emerge from *within* the national school system, recognizing and complying with its logics. It cannot be transplanted wholesale from another orbit.⁵⁹ In the same vein, economist Kenneth Boulding, himself a movement activist in a 1960s wave of “international education,” wrote in 1968 that the question is not whether an alternative to nationalistic education can be imagined, but

whether we can develop an image of the world system which is at the same time realistic and also not threatening to the folk cultures within which the school systems are embedded; for if educators do not find a palatable formula, the “folk” will revolt and seek to divert formal education once again into traditional channels.⁶⁰

The most traditional of these channels in education is nationalism. We should be skeptical, then, of the glib use of the terms “global citizens” and “world citizens” by government officials, school leaders, and business roundtable members. Speaking of these things in the current milieu turns the meanings of the terms on their heads, making them lexical resources for a continuation of national education by other means.

DISCUSSION: IRONY AND MULTIPLICITY

I have argued that the discourses of derision, multiculturalism, and nationalism are serving as both constraints and enablers in the social construction of public schooling today. In other words, they constitute some portion (but surely not the whole⁶¹) of the social matrix in which public schooling and its actors and interest groups now proceed and contend with one another. At the same time, as we have seen, they are media of their own (re)construction by agents who use them as resources for their own purposes. A drumbeat of derision has constructed an extreme but now remarkably modal school-reform platform that assumes public schooling is terribly broken and also is the key to our society’s vitality and prosperity. Multiculturalism is structuring curriculum contention, broadening the array of heroes celebrated in the American “hall of fame” while giving wiggle room to the Christian right; and neither of these initiatives of “inclusion” has brought about a critical telling of the nation’s history. And, as we just saw, nationalism is structuring even international education in public schools.

59. Isaac Leon Kandel, “Intelligent Nationalism in the School Curriculum,” in *International Understanding Through the Public School Curriculum*, part 2 of *Thirty-Sixth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, ed. Isaac Leon Kandel and G.M. Whipple (Bloomington, Illinois: Public School Publishing, 1937), 35–42.

60. Kenneth E. Boulding, “Inside Spaceship Earth,” *Social Education* 45, no. 7 (1968): 650.

61. I make no claim about how large a portion. It is commonplace to argue that capitalism’s newest formation, neoliberalism, tells nearly the whole story of the (re)construction of public schooling in the United States today, as well as in the United Kingdom and the European Union. While neoliberalism does have tremendous reproductive depth and power, much else appears to be going on, too, at the construction site of public schooling. (On the neoliberal juggernaut, see Katharyne Mitchell, “Educating the Citizen in Neoliberal Times,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 28, no. 4 (2003): 387–403.)

These ironies and incongruities are probably more the norm than the exception in the broad arena of school change today. The reason for this is that structures are not independent but interactive. Together they weave the present foment. Sewell argues that change is possible — reproduction is not inevitable — because “societies are based on practices that derive from many distinct structures, which exist at different levels, operate in different modalities, and are themselves based on widely varying types and quantities of resources.” It is the multiplicity of structures and their interaction that causes school change to head in unintended and incongruous directions. “Social actors,” Sewell continues, “are capable of applying a wide range of different and even incompatible” rules and resources.⁶² To illustrate this multiplicity, let us look again into the “international education” movement.

Recall that three weak discourses are jockeying for position around the strong discourse of national security, and that one of the three is cosmopolitanism. In a well-known essay mentioned earlier, Nussbaum proposed that it is time for schools to transform civic education not in the usual liberal or progressive ways (for example, by increasing its civic action dimension), but *by removing it from the national container altogether*. She proposes that school children should no longer be taught that they are, above all, citizens of the United States and stewards of its interests and ideals, but that “they are, above all, citizens of a world of human beings.”⁶³ To come to identify ourselves as a “citizens of the world” (cosmopolitans) is to resist the naturalized structure of identification primarily with a “fatherland” and national membership. We are freed to dwell instead in two communities: the local community of our birth and the wide community of humanity.

Even on Zimmerman’s accommodating “road from Chicago,” Nussbaum’s cosmopolitan curriculum proposal is, well, road kill. It is in direct conflict with America’s celebratory multicultural narrative of “inclusion” because that narrative is a *national* one. The widening pantheon is a *national* pantheon. Indeed, both the patriotic road from Chicago and the religious road from Dayton are *national* roads. At the same time, cosmopolitan education is in conflict with the current bipartisan construct of “school reform” that is dominated by a *national* crisis-and-salvation story. Nationalism, then, not only makes it difficult for cosmopolitan agents to find wiggle room in the IE movement, it is also busily structuring school reform, multiculturalism, and curriculum contention in general.

CONCLUSION

Public schooling is an unstable construct. Change agents, such as the ones featured in this article — Diane Ravitch; the Texas School Board; Mayor “Big Bill” Thompson in Chicago; John T. Scopes and the ACLU in Tennessee; school

62. Sewell, “A Theory of Structure,” 16–17.

63. Nussbaum, “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” 6. See also the discussion of Nussbaum’s proposal in Mitchell and Parker, “I Pledge Allegiance To . . . Flexible Citizenship and Shifting Scales of Belonging.”

principals who mobilize the International Student Body; Martha Nussbaum; state senators Yee (California, opposing the Texas revision), Dayton (Utah, opposing the IB program), and Keith (Louisiana, favoring "creation-science"); and others — are, as human actors, deciding on a case-by-case basis how, where, and on what to act. They are forming intentions and responses that are in sync with their knowledge of events, forces, and other actors. They are enabled to act by a multiplicity of structures, and they are seriously constrained by them, too. As such, public schooling is, as a whole, an especially lively construction site in the ongoing (re)construction of U.S. society. It is a singularly revealing space since so many broader social forces race downstream and get things done there. I hope to have shown that school change is fueled by discourses of derision, multiculturalism, and nationalism, but also by knowledgeable strategic agents who swim both upstream and downstream to "work" the system and advance their aims. In this way, history and biography are conjoined to make change and stasis in public schooling today.

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