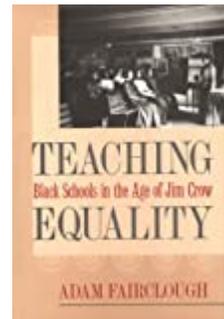




Adam Fairclough. *Teaching Equality: Black Schools in the Age of Jim Crow.* Mercer University Lamar Memorial Lectures. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001. x + 110 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2272-8.



Reviewed by Ronald E. Butchart (Department of Social Foundations of Education, University of Georgia)

Published on H-South (May, 2002)

Defending Liberal Reformism, Misunderstanding Schools, Teachers, Education, and Their Histories

Defending Liberal Reformism, Misunderstanding Schools, Teachers, Education, and Their Histories

In this very little book—three score and seven pages of text merely—Adam Fairclough attempts a very large task: to trace the influence of southern black education under Jim Crow on the struggle for African American civil rights. Convinced that we now confront a “Janus-faced literature on black education” (p. 14), Fairclough seeks to exonerate Jim Crow black schools from charges of conservatism and resistance to integration.

Despite his title, Fairclough’s three chapters tell us little about black schools, focusing instead on black teachers. He thereby relieves himself of the thankless but essential labor of examining curriculum, both implicit and explicit, modes of pedagogy, structures of discipline, and the intent of the wildly different forms of schooling at the heart of the historical issues he essays. Mistitling a book should not stand as a criticism, however. The literature on the history of teachers and teaching is extraordinarily thin, and historians should welcome all efforts to extend that literature. The question, then, is the degree to which this study of black teachers fills that bill. Whatever might

be said of black schools, how well does he carry an argument regarding the role of Jim Crow-era black educators in nurturing the integrationist Civil Rights movement?

Fairclough attempts to establish a progressive role for black educators through three cases. His first chapter, “Liberation or Collaboration?,” echoes much of contemporary historiography to the effect that African Americans had a deep commitment to literacy and racial autonomy, and that southern black education was, ultimately, a bi-racial movement. Fairclough transmutes that commitment to a “faith” in education in order to pose the question, “Yet was the faith of black southerners in education—and in their teachers—a cruel illusion?” (p. 10).

A provocative question, surely, though not one that fully conforms to the black community’s lived relationship with its schools or its teachers. It is, in other words, not self-evident that the unshakable quest for literacy, and the centuries-long struggle for education, equated to a “faith” in education as some magical talisman. What it equated to was a clear-eyed conviction that the community would thrive only to the extent that it gained access

to the social capital of the dominant race. Whether most blacks actually had “faith” that such social capital would yield equality has yet to be established. It clearly was no illusion that access to social capital was essential if the community was to retain its tenuous foothold in a racist society.

One ends the first chapter knowing only what much of the recent literature has been telling us unambiguously. Black teachers took on themselves, and had thrust upon them, far more roles and goals than could ever be realized (a fact of life for all public school teachers in the last century). The vital necessity of racial diplomacy inevitably and unceasingly undermined, contradicted, and vitiated teachers’ efforts to instill courage and pride. The situation in the Jim Crow South erected barriers to racial progress that African American leaders surmounted literally at their peril. Improvements in black education in the 1930s were not paralleled by political or economic gains. But then in an odd shift, the chapter ends in an effort to rehabilitate Booker T. Washington, apparently the intent throughout the chapter. Tellingly, in that effort, Fairclough is reduced to asserting plaintively that although black education deteriorated throughout Washington’s ascendancy, “things might have been even worse” (p. 18). Well, true enough. Or the converse. Fairclough provides nothing here to sustain either position.

Nor does much in the first chapter sustain its final, ringing claim in defense of Washington and other black teachers: “however much it appeared otherwise, they were educating for equality” (p. 19). If, indeed, it “appeared otherwise” to some contemporaries and to many subsequent historians, what, exactly, might it mean to be teaching for equality? Surely, we have enough sophistication about the processes of education to know by now that how it appeared was as important as, and perhaps far more profoundly important than, what was intended. That is precisely the point being made by the many black activists whose judgments about their schoolings so discomfit Fairclough. To counter their angry memories, Fairclough asserts that all were teaching equality, never mind Carter G. Woodson’s characterization of some such teaching as nothing less than the profound mis-education of the Negro (significantly, Fairclough’s bibliography is innocent of any of Woodson’s work).

Where Fairclough’s first case surveys the field broadly, concluding that black educators of Washington’s generation and earlier “kept hope alive” (p. 19), the second case begins with a single black educator, Robert R. Moton, Washington’s successor at Tuskegee. Insisting

that Moton’s pandering to white audiences was justifiable guile to achieve particular goals, Fairclough reasons outward from Moton to an entire generation of black college presidents and their institutions. Those colleges increased educational opportunities for black youths; they constituted an intellectual space within which to create a critique of white supremacy and encourage critical thinking; they “permitted and even encouraged political activity outside the classroom” (p. 37); they encouraged a sense of individual and collective efficacy; and they encouraged the scholarly research that helped change the conventional wisdom about race and influenced whites in positions of power.

Fairclough’s claims here are too frequently shaky. For instance, the critique of white supremacy so important to the civil rights struggle of mid-century did not originate primarily in black colleges. Indeed, Washington and other educators fought bitter battles against precisely the independent black intellectuals—W.E.B. DuBois, William Monroe Trotter, Ida B. Wells, Marcus Garvey, Carter G. Woodson, and a phalanx of other writers and editors—who gave voice to that critique. Instead, black students and a handful of black professors imported their critique into the colleges. Few of those intellectuals enjoyed the confidence and support of Moton and other college presidents.

Similarly, Fairclough sustains his claim regarding campus-based political activity with the curious story about Moton who, at the conclusion of a speech by DuBois condemning segregation and discrimination, could think of no better response than to deflect students’ attention from the burning issues before them and toward the “great game we had yesterday!” (p. 38). If that is the best evidence of “black colleges permitt[ing] and even encourag[ing] political activity,” the argument cannot stand. Such intellectual vacuity could have nurtured little critical thinking.

Or again: while Fairclough claims that black colleges provided the social space to develop individual and collective efficacy, the evidence he himself adduces suggests that the students arrived on the campuses with that sense of efficacy in their luggage, derived from their own rich culture. Ironically, in many cases they found it necessary to mobilize that sense of efficacy against their own administrators and colleges. Fairclough provides no evidence that such efficacy arose from the particular structures, curriculum, or pedagogy of the colleges. I doubt that he can.

After making those specific claims, he complains that

black college administrators found themselves under fire from civil rights activists who were attacking segregation. The problem for Fairclough is that few of the arguments he attempts in this chapter tell us about administrators, except Moton—we learn things about colleges, not all of which can be sustained, but little enough about administrators. In fact, some did display the “intellectual and spiritual sterility” that George R. Woolfolk spoke of (p. 40), Fairclough to the contrary notwithstanding. It is not clear from anything provided here that such sterility was necessary to sustain black colleges, the direct implication of Fairclough’s argument.

It is certainly true that the black college in the abstract served for over a century as a symbol of the “radical acceptance of the principle of human equality” (p. 41, quoting Horace Mann Bond). That was true no matter how autocratic or reactionary the leadership of any particular college. Fairclough’s argument in this second chapter, in other words, eventually ends in a classic non-sequitur. Black colleges as generalized places, like higher education in general, provided access and space; they were, indeed, the “sinew, brains, and soul of the black community” (p. 40). But we cannot reason from that generalization to the specific claim that the presidents of black colleges should be immune from criticism, any more than we can reason from the centrality and power of the black church that black ministers were morally upright and committed to the political emancipation of their congregations. Many were; others were not.

Fairclough’s third case involves the often rocky relationship between black public school teachers and the civil rights movement, particularly that portion of the movement dedicated to desegregating schools. The teachers have occasionally been characterized as socially and politically conservative, teaching acquiescence rather than resistance. Conversely, some historians link black education to the black struggle for equality. Fairclough seeks to resolve the contradiction in those characterizations by exploring how teachers and the NAACP responded to one another over time. But here, too, Fairclough falls into a non-sequitur. Black education clearly implied equality by its very existence—hence segregationists’ fear of strong black schools. But it does not follow that every curricular decision, every pedagogical act, every mode of classroom organization, was bent toward equality. Fairclough tells us too little about life in black classrooms. We simply have no evidence regarding the implicit or explicit intent of teachers vis a vis liberation. Further, and more critically, we have no attempt here to measure the likelihood that such actions would, indeed,

culminate in liberation.

But perhaps the oddest non-sequitur is Fairclough’s insistence, more implicit than explicit, that teaching toward equality meant, ipso facto, teaching and working toward integration. There were scores of teachers, activists, intellectuals, and others, then as now, who were not at all convinced of the naive faith that putting black children in white schools would do anything to alter the alignments of power in American society. For many teachers, the calculus was relatively simple: if schools are integrated, many if not most of us will lose our jobs. They were right, and we have never calculated the vast social cost of having lost two full generations of black educators. For others, the calculus was more complicated: the problem was not the ephemeral “right” to learn in the august presence of white children; the problem was social, economic, and political inequality, enforced judicially in some places but imposed culturally throughout the nation, and arising economically in a system pivoting on inevitable inequality.

Fairclough acknowledges that black teachers had reason to be concerned about integration. They would lose their jobs, and “dismissal represented economic calamity. White teachers had a variety of white-collar career options; black teachers did not” (p. 63). He should have added that white teachers needed no options. They were not going to be the ones paying the price for putting black children in white schools. Black teachers, and black students, would pay that price.

Many people saw the price that would be paid, including prominently DuBois. But the question ultimately is not whether anyone was then prescient enough to see that. The question is whether subsequent historians can see the price, or are merely committed to uncritically celebrating integration.

At one level of analysis, this book pivots on a post-hoc argument, one that particularly emerges in the third chapter: black schools antedated the civil rights movement; therefore they contributed to that movement. What is needed in place of such dubious forms of argumentation is the research that would identify the sorts of schools, the kinds of curricular emphases, the forms of pedagogy, the structures of classroom and schoolwide discipline, the varieties of vision and intent, that appear to have been most likely to nurture the forms of thinking and acting, the habits of the heart and the habits of mind, that resulted in civil rights activism (and not merely in integrationist activism). It is quite unlikely that the unfortunate schools that Fairclough cites—largely ru-

ral, crowded into buildings little better than sheds, taught by young teachers only marginally better educated than their charges (pp. 47-49)—were as effective at fostering the prerequisite understandings and commitments as, say, such remarkable schools as the one so ably documented by Vanessa Siddle Walker. Similarly, one wonders whether schools such as Albany Bible and Manual Training Institute (pp. 34-35) were as likely to nurture activism as, say, Dunbar High School.[1] But Fairclough makes no distinctions. Southern black schools were teaching equality, no matter what.

And if that was the case, form and content apparently mattered little. The academic rigor of a Dunbar High School, or a school's fetish for teaching grooming and manners to the neglect of history and English, or Walker's school's powerful community, or rural schools' frequent inability to teach much of anything at all—all appear in this telling as equally important. And in a single stroke, Fairclough constructs schooling as an historical factor of constant, unidirectional, and inevitable power, for everything that passed for schooling contributed, apparently equally, to the eventual historical outcome. Would that it were true.

In fact, the relationships between southern black schools and their communities, the curriculum pressed within them, the individuals who led them, the vision of black possibility nurtured by the schools' structures and teaching, the intentions of their architects, black and white, and the racial cultures surrounding them, were deeply conflicted and complex. Any history of black education must take those into account rather than simply insist that the existence of schools taught equality and led eventually to integration. Southern black schools were marked inevitably by irony and tragedy, tropes that Fairclough has not mastered here.

Segregation was a nasty stain on white America's democratic pretensions. It was incumbent upon the nation to remove that stain. But the cost of cleansing that stain fell on black America; it cost white America little beyond the injured pride of the white South. Fairclough would have us believe that the liberal means of eliminating that white problem was the only reasonable means to that end. That was not clear in the 1940s and 1950s, and it is even less clear in historical hindsight.

To that argument, Fairclough has a weak response. The only alternative to integration was equalization, according to Fairclough. "The strategy of equalization, however, contained a fundamental weakness," he writes. "Even if ... whites improved black schools and colleges

to a point where they resembled white facilities, they still intended to maintain a racial division of labor in the economy. Equality of educational opportunity was a cruel deception in a society organized around the principle of white supremacy" (pp. 60-61).

The problem for Fairclough is that the racial division of labor remains a half century later. Integrating schools affected who black children learned from and beside, not where they ended up in the economy. Learning from and beside whites simply removed from their educational experience the racial solidarity their parents learned in black schools. Such experiences masked the actual race and class operation of the market, and racialized even further the war of all against all that sustains that market.

As schools increasingly resegregate today, meanwhile, the century-long tradition of black academic struggle has been replaced by sub-cultures that disparage learning as a racial sell-out. The centuries-long tradition of honored and committed black teachers has been replaced by an overwhelmingly white teaching force that, even when sympathetic to black students, is increasingly forced by high-stakes testing and the enforced homogenization of pedagogy into patterns of teaching that serve fewer and fewer of the most needy students. The centuries-long commitment to literacy and knowledge as evidence of equality, a hedge against white power, and a means to dignity regardless of one's temporal occupation, have been replaced by narrow striving for educational advantages for pragmatic, market-place ends, a striving that reinforces class inequalities and differential dignity. The strategy of integrating schools to the exclusion of fundamental social change can be heralded as heroic only if we accept the dubious notion that history ended in 1954, or perhaps 1964, or possibly 1984.

Fairclough ignores those subsequent historical realities. Instead, he insists that "no amount of historical revisionism can negate the significance of the *Brown* decision in undermining the foundations of white supremacy... *Plessy v. Ferguson* had to be destroyed—even if black teachers, black schools, and black communities paid a great price" (p. 66). What a stunning claim, particularly in the absence of any attempt to assess the price! What is ignored in such a formulation is that, by the 1950s, white supremacy was structurally obsolete. Its foundations already lay in ruins, though its ghost would stir up trouble for years after *Brown*. Other means of gaining and legitimating the subordination of the lower classes of all races had emerged by mid-century, means that were less ideologically embarrassing to the nation. *Plessy v. Ferguson*

was not only an ideological embarrassment at an historical moment when the United States thought it was losing the war for the hearts and minds of the world's people of color—it had become a serious impediment to capital accumulation, creating inefficiencies in labor mobilization and in the expansion of consumer markets. The destruction of *Plessy* was of great benefit to emerging corporate formations, even if not the intention of the court decisions; conveniently, the cost would be borne by black teachers, black schools, and black communities, not by those who would profit from its demise.

Fairclough notes the role of pre-Brown black education as a means of social sorting, slotting black students into inferior positions while lifting a few into positions of professional service to the black community. But he ignores the continuing role of schools, overwhelmingly segregated internally by academic tracks when not re-segregated, in perpetuating the same process of the intergenerational reproduction of inequality. The well-documented savage inequalities in contemporary schools demonstrate that together-but-unequal is as effective a means of assuring inequality as separate-but-equal. Ideologically, it may be more effective. Under advanced industrialism and its cultural apparatus, inequality can as easily be legitimated and reproduced by gentler means, though the inequalities will remain just as savage.

Fairclough's concluding line is powerful, though not in the context intended. He asserts that, "By insisting upon the sanctity of knowledge and the innate humanity of black children, [Jim Crow black educators] performed political work of the most far-reaching kind" (67). True. And the people and structures who performed that political work were the people and structures taken out by liberal integrationism, leaving the next generations of young black people without lessons in the sanctity of knowledge or their own innate humanity. In the place of those lessons came another political work of a most far-reaching kind: teaching all but the most privileged of those black children that knowledge has only pragmatic value, and only for those who can participate in the privileged economy; teaching that dignity is never collective and never granted through one's innate humanity—dignity is individual, granted differentially according to one's success in gaining advantages over others. That may be historical revisionism, but it is also true. It may not negate the significance of *Brown*. It does, however, call into question the degree to which the last fifty years have justified the faith that a nation that puts black children in white schools, to learn in competition with white children, under the tutelage of white teachers, can, ab-

sent vital changes in the deeper structures that constrain institutions and people, fundamentally alter the distribution of dignity and humanity, or status and rewards, in that nation.

The fundamental flaw in this deeply flawed book is the assumption that the existence of schools is, in and of itself, historically progressive. The existence of schools is historically significant, but the precise nature of that significance must be established by historians, not merely celebrated. The mere existence of schools tells us nothing about the dispositions, aspirations, knowledge, or critical abilities acquired within them. Even the existence of schools taught by black teachers, sustained by the black community, and teaching against the grain of a racist culture, tells us little about the social and economic ideologies transmitted, intentionally or, far more likely, unintentionally, through the explicit and implicit curriculum of the school, or the perspectives and commitments that arise from such ideologies. We learn about those things by studying the actual lived experience of classrooms and teachers. Fairclough attempts no such study.

Did black teachers under Jim Crow teach equality? Many emphatically did. Others clearly did not. Adam Fairclough provides no guidance to understand the factors at work in either case. Did southern black schools under Jim Crow contribute to an integrationist stance in the historic struggle for civil rights? Despite many claims in that direction, Adam Fairclough provides no compelling evidence of that. It is likely that those many schools that did teach equality contributed in uncertain ways to a commitment to civil rights. It is not at all clear, however, that most would have therefore automatically embraced the integrationist strain of activism. Indeed, it is more likely that many emerged highly ambivalent about that particular conflicted and contradictory option.

In the form in which this material originally reached a public – as a series of three lectures – it doubtlessly impressed. Fairclough is nothing if not a fine stylist. But as a book, to be read with care, attending to warrants, logic, sources, silences, omissions, and quality, it fails.

Note

(1). Vanessa Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Faustine Childress Jones, *A Traditional Model of Educational Excellence: Dunbar High School of Little Rock, Arkansas* (Washington, D.C. : Howard University Press, 1981).

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Citation: Ronald E. Butchart. Review of Fairclough, Adam, *Teaching Equality: Black Schools in the Age of Jim Crow*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. May, 2002.

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