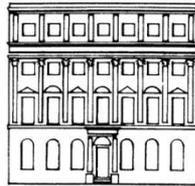


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Making Winners? Transforming Individuals through Education in Colonial and Post-Colonial Contexts

Conference Report

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Making Winners? Transforming Individuals through Education in Colonial and Post-Colonial Contexts, session of the Fiftieth German *Historikertag*, held on 23–26 Sept. 2014 in Göttingen. Session organized by the German Historical Institute London and held on 25 Sept. 2014.

This session brought together historians from Britain, the partner country of this year's *Historikertag*, the German Historical Institute London, and the Transnational Research Group on Poverty and Education in Modern India. The presentations, however, covered many more countries, providing a truly international perspective on how education was planned and experimented with, and how it shaped people's lives in colonial and post-colonial times. The session engaged with educational methods and transformative aspects of education, ranging from Indian monitorial schools to female education in Sierra Leone and Nigeria, new experiments in mass education on an international scale, and the importance of education for children from working-class households in Mumbai.

As Andreas Gestrich (GHIL) emphasized in his introduction, education is not only a mechanism for transforming individuals, but has itself always been subject to transformation. This happens through the introduction of new educational concepts and as the result of experiments, but also by the processes of transferring these concepts globally and adapting them (sometimes unintentionally) to new contexts. In addition to tracing these processes of transformation, this session revolved around the central question of the purpose of education. Beyond the old Enlightenment idea of making better individuals through education, it has always been a tool for certain interests, whether in favour of transforming society or maintaining its order.

In the first presentation Jana Tschurennev (TRG, Göttingen) looked at the monitorial system and its introduction in early nineteenth-century British India. This new form of schooling for the poor was

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marked by an inherent tension: while schools were organized in a highly competitive meritocratic system, the missionaries' intention was to maintain the hierarchical social order and keep people in their places. Their teaching method was based on the concepts of Joseph Lancaster and Andrew Bell. Advanced students were asked to teach the less advanced, and lessons followed an extremely rigid plan. The main objective of these schools was to produce rational subjects with Christian moral values who would be able to make themselves useful to society. Among the challenges which this educational method faced, Tschurennev highlighted that the meritocratic system was seen as containing the danger of raising expectations among students, possibly leading to social mobility; hence education had to be kept within certain limits. This demonstrates that education was seen primarily not as a medium for individual development, but as a tool for maintaining a certain order in society.

Silke Strickrodt (GHIL), too, assessed educational experiments by missionaries in the British Empire, shifting the focus from India to Sierra Leone. She analysed the transformation of the missionaries' educational ideals when they set up the Church Missionary Society's (CMS) Female Institution in 1849 and were confronted with local ideas and demands. Unlike the schools in the monitorial system, this was an example of exclusive, elite education based on a highly selective system. It intended to transform the girls morally and spiritually into Christians, housewives, and mothers. In contrast to this missionary objective, Strickrodt emphasized, the parents did not want their girls to be transformed in this way, but made their own demands, which were largely oriented by British values. This example clearly demonstrates that information about ways of life and educational patterns circulated in various ways and were not solely transferred by missionaries. This story also underlines that it is not always easy to identify the 'winners' and 'losers' of educational experiments. Rather, we are confronted with complex entanglements, and the outcomes of education are rarely limited to what was intended.

The regional focus shifted back to India in the following presentation, with education among the elites in colonial times remaining the main theme. Georgina Brewis (London) gave an insight into the Indian students' social service leagues in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Brewis found that the focus was on the transfor-

mation of moral values in those who participated in the service, with the aim of making them future leaders of the country, rather than on the outcome of the service. Brewis drew attention to a kind of education that was, paradoxically, closely intertwined with the British system on one hand, but became part of the Indian nation-building movement on the other. In both previous presentations, there was no doubt that the concepts were developed by British missionaries and changed only as a result of encountering the different contexts in which they were applied. In the case of the Indian social service, there were conflicting claims about whether these concepts had indigenous roots or had been introduced by British missionaries. Brewis emphasized that the student social service in India was a hybrid model, including a set of Christian as well as Hindu influences, and can therefore be seen as reflecting the constant interplay of ideas and practices between European and Indian educationalists in India.

Charlotte Hastings (Manchester) provided another example of female education in colonial Africa. She traced the struggle to set up a regular secondary school for girls in Nigeria, highlighting the ignorance with which the government responded to the demand that girls should receive an education beyond being taught how to be good housewives and mothers according to Christian values. Only with the establishment of the Advisory Committee on Native Education in British Tropical Africa (later renamed Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies) and the first female appointments to it, did education for girls slowly gain more attention. Queen's College was finally opened ten years after the campaign began. The way in which the school was run by the colonial administration revealed discrimination on the basis of race. There was a clear preference for appointing British teachers, and women were paid less than men. The example of Faith Wordsworth, an English teacher who was the main figure during Queen's College's initial phase, reveals a wide gap between her ideals and those of the colonial administrators. Highly praised for her achievements in girls' education, she herself was deeply disappointed by the meagre support she received. This demonstrates not only how educational concepts and ideas in colonial times changed under the influence of the local population, but also that conflicting ideas and visions existed in parallel and were negotiated among different colonial actors.

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From the regional examples of the session Valeska Huber (GHIL) turned to an educational experiment that was introduced on a global scale. In the late colonial period, when programmes of mass education and informal education became more widespread, the American missionary Frank C. Laubach invented one of the more successful methods for educating the 'masses'. Laubach's method was based on simplifying the alphabet and making everyone teach others the lessons that they themselves had learned (a technique he took from Lancaster and Bell). Laubach was guided by his vision that everyone should be able to read and write so that the 'masses' would be transformed into a population able to take part in political life. As Huber emphasized, he was convinced that literacy could solve problems of poverty, overpopulation, and ill health. As well as suggesting that such a simplified approach to solving all other problems by tackling just one aspect seems problematic, Huber also pointed to other shortcomings of Laubach's method, including the question of how sustainable it really was. Laubach's method was, however, adopted in many countries to which he travelled and by UNESCO. It proved to be a popular attempt to transfer a specific educational method to various regional contexts.

Completing the trajectory from early colonial to post-colonial times, Sumeet Mhaskar (Göttingen) returned to a micro perspective and looked at the educational attainments of ex-mill workers' children in Mumbai, asking what factors influenced the educational attainment of working-class young people. Overall, he found that the children's education was only slightly more advanced than that of their parents. The factors he identified as important (beyond, of course, the financial status of their families) were: parental education, neighbourhood and school peer effect, career guidance, part-time employment, private tuition, and language of schooling. According to Mhaskar, these factors had the potential to enable children to achieve social and economic upward mobility. They were, therefore, decisive for whether the children of ex-mill workers could take charge of their individual futures, or were left behind. Receiving solid career guidance seemed to have played an especially important role for the educational achievements of the children. This shows that the aim with which education was pursued was extremely relevant. In this context, education was seen primarily as a path to a certain career, rather than as a way of achieving personal fulfilment.

The same question — education to what end? — was also addressed in the discussion, which recognized that the session had shed light on several ‘ends’ of education as a transformative mechanism on the individual level and far beyond. The session clearly demonstrated that the transformative power of education can be used for very different purposes. The fact that education has itself always been subject to various transformations, intended or not, makes this field such a fascinating one for both historical and contemporary research. It was pointed out that there has always been a great deal of exchange of educational ideas and concepts between countries and continents, and although London can be seen as the centre for the parts of the British Empire presented here, information flows were highly decentralized and not limited to the Empire’s borders. Another aspect discussed was the interconnection between education and respectability, most powerfully demonstrated in the case of girls’ education among the elites in Sierra Leone, where a certain type of education seems to have been very important for achieving the English respectability envisaged. In general, education’s inherent potential to make people ‘winners’ was agreed upon, even though it became clear that it was not always easy to tell who they were. Another central aspect discussed was the tension between education as a tool for individual achievement, and for maintaining the social order and keeping people in their places. The session showed that analysing this tension between education as a tool for liberation and for social control should be on the research agenda in many different geographical and political settings.

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