Imagine All the People

literature, society, and cross-national variation in education systems

By CATHIE JO MARTIN

In light of their nineteenth-century political economies, why did poor, agricultural Denmark become a leader in public, mass primary education (1814) and a multiple-track education system that included vocational training, while rich, industrial Britain did not create public, mass schooling until 1870, and embraced a one-track, academic secondary-education system? The author argues that literary narratives shed light on these cross-national differences. Danish narratives imagined education as social investment for a strong society; diverse educational tracks were necessary to meet the varied skills needs of the economy. British narratives portrayed schooling as essential to self-development and to cultivating the ideal individual. The author uses a close reading of texts and computational linguistics analyses of 521 Danish and 562 British works of fiction from 1700 to 1920 to document the different portrayal of education in the two countries. Case studies show that writers are crucial political actors in important reforms and understudied political agents in policy development stories. The method allows the author to evaluate empirically the complex relationship between culture and political outcomes, to falsify cultural claims, and to improve on thin, vague, national cultural arguments. The article shows how literature helps to reconcile the contradictions embedded in diverse models of governance. Literature provides a site for reworking cultural symbols in response to societal struggles over exogenous change, and provides a source of continuity at moments of institutional change.

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