Introduction

Education for Some or Education for All?

INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time, two countries traded places. Denmark, an obscure, rural, medium-sized country on the outskirts of Europe – grew up from its ugly duckling past to become an exemplar of the good life with a happy, well-functioning, prosperous society. Meanwhile, Britain – the early leader of the industrial revolution with an unparalleled skilled labor workforce – floundered in its maturation and lost its competitive edge. This book tells the tale of how education choices at the precipice of modern history facilitated the rise or decline of these nations. Danish policymakers developed schools to serve all citizens, and these choices helped Denmark leapfrog into a modern, social democratic powerhouse system. Britain lagged in building schools for the masses; and its failure to craft programs for workforce skills both hastened its economic and social decline and widened the gap between rich and poor.

Fiction writers are the unsung heroes of our story, agents of change whose narratives served as rallying cries for the education campaigns of the long nineteenth century. Fiction writers also gained a special kind of immortality, as their narratives about schooling would be carried forward by their literary descendants and resonate for centuries to come. Yet British and Danish authors used their power of the pen to advocate for very different visions of schooling. In the fictional worlds of Danish writers, mass schools became the foundation for a great society, a tool for economic growth, and a weapon for national security; poets and novelists glorified peasants in words and songs (Korsgaard 2004; Bobe 1895–1931; Jespersen 2011; Reeh 2016; Thaarup 1822/1786, 287). Most British authors imagined a very different reality: mass education would threaten domestic stability, derail work by the lower classes, and contaminate national culture (Malthus 1809, 27–28; Brantlinger 1998).

Literary portrayals of schooling – and the education system choices that they helped to inspire – had real world impacts on the British and Danish political economies. In Britain, schooling geared toward the upper and middle classes, rather than toward "education for all," drastically limited the fortunes of low-skill young people and other vulnerable populations. Even British reformers concerned about equality concentrated on expanding access to academic programs for talented working-class students and later on increasing school equality across districts. Yet they paid scant attention to improving vocational programs and serving the needs of students lacking academic talents (Payne and Keep 2011). Authors' cultural narratives reinforced the idea of educating winners, rather than benefiting the larger population, even when these authors cared about social problems. With their stories of protagonists who overcame structural injustices with individual determination, they made it easier to blame those who failed to seize educational opportunities and to dismiss the youth who were left behind.

In contrast, Danish education system choices served to benefit the working class.[1] Rather than merely relegating workers to second-class education, Denmark's excellent vocational training programs strengthened workforce skills and increased socioeconomic equality (Iversen and Stephens 2008; Busemeyer 2015). Fiction writers' depictions of the needs of a strong society bolstered the mandate to educate all the people: neglecting low-skill youth was a waste of societal resources and a threat to social fabric. Investments in education for the masses were initially intended not to achieve equality but rather to produce productive workers. Nevertheless, those investments did help to bring about high levels of equality and made it easier for social democratic governments to achieve both efficiency and equality.

EDUCATION IN THE LONG NINETEENTH CENTURY

Throughout the long nineteenth century, many European countries embarked on ambitious projects to build systems of mass public education. These projects were shaped by three major developments unfolding in Europe at the time: nation-building, industrialization, and democratization. Each of these developments required resources and capabilities that mass public education was uniquely positioned to deliver. Nation-building required citizens and soldiers to offer money, manpower, and cultural commitment to the polity for defense, conquest, and other nationalist goals. Industrialization demanded workforce skills and technological acumen. In responding to the pressures of democratization, elites sought informed voters and mechanisms for limiting social instabilities.

Yet countries made vastly different – and often surprising – policy choices in their crafting of early education systems (Benavot et al. 1991; Resnick 2006).

[1] I use the term "working class" to refer to both agricultural and industrial workers.

Despite having few natural resources and enserfed peasants, Denmark was one of the first countries in the world to develop a mass, public primary education system in 1814; in contrast, Britain delayed mass, public primary education until 1870, and working-class students received limited schooling before that time. Furthermore, when agricultural Denmark consolidated its secondary education system in 1903, the system included publicly funded vocational training programs for working-class students in addition to academic tracks for the college-bound. In contrast, with its 1902 Secondary Education Act, manufacturing Britain shifted all funding for vocational programs to a new, single-tiered, academic secondary education system that did little to cultivate technical skills.

British and Danish education systems were forged in the heat of political struggle (Moe and Wiborg 2017), but also by the light of particular cultural conceptions of education, society, class, and state. In Britain, schooling was intended to nurture individual self-development, initially for the upper and middle class; a classical, humanistic secondary-school curricula would offer a path to individual self-actualization. Paradoxically, many British reformers and authors cared deeply about inequality and they lobbied to extend education to the working class. Yet they believed that individual self-development for workers required access to the same knowledge available to elites and they fretted that vocational programs could become a dumping ground for the lower classes. Because they focused on individual rather than societal development, they thought less than their Danish counterparts about what the economy demanded in terms of vocational skills. Moreover, the state's role in the education project was contested sharply along partisan lines.

Danish policymakers acknowledged the moral and cognitive benefits of education for the individual; however, they also placed stock in building society and ensuring that every citizen (including workers and peasants) made a social and economic contribution to the collective good. To this end, they endorsed diverse educational tracks to meet varied societal needs for skills and believed that experiential learning, rather than set lessons, was a better way to teach nonacademic students. The state's role was readily accepted; yet policymakers respected the autonomy of communities and permitted extensive local experimentation with educational forms.

Although cultural conceptions about education seem relevant to British and Danish policy choices, the exact nature of that influence leaves perplexing questions. Where did these cultural frames come from? How were these frames transmitted across time and through shifting economic, political, and social circumstances? How did cultural perceptions interact with class struggle and other drivers of reform? How should we study cultural values from centuries past when empirical assessments of public opinion date back only to the twentieth century? Should we even attempt to formulate theories about these values on a national level, given that earlier generations of political scientists used unfounded claims about national values to assert the superiority

of American political institutions and to defend US political and economic interests (Huntington 1996)? Should we worry that national literary corpora were dominated by white men in centuries past, which is why contemporary scholars search for the alternative voices of women and people of color in constructing the wonderful cultural potpourri of nation-states (Bhabha 1990; Stratton and Ang 1994)?

CULTURE AND POLITICS

Education for All? explores these questions and develops a model to capture how fiction writers and their cultural artifacts matter to political and institutional change. The model includes a level of individual *agency*, which delves into impacts by activist authors in policy struggles, and a *structural* level that investigates the collective development of cultural narratives and symbols in a nation's literary corpora across generations. Armed with twenty-first-century sensibilities and techniques, I seek to uncover new insights about nation-level cultural assumptions and their influence on the development of mass systems of public education.

First, some fiction writers were important political *agents* in struggles over schooling, as they were part of the *avant-garde* within the chattering classes who put distressing social conditions on the political agenda well before policy reforms were taken up within channels of government. Joining political movements to advance education reforms, these poets (and novelists) of the revolution helped to forge new ideologies to win the hearts and minds of both elites and the masses. As spin-doctors in episodes of policy reform, they turned ideas into palatable bite-size pieces that were both compelling and easily digested by nonexperts. Their narratives contributed to what social scientists call "cognitive frames" or a set of assumptions about how the world works, and these helped other political actors develop their educational priorities. Fiction was a medium that was particularly well-suited to imbuing political issues with emotional salience, as one is moved by the suffering and triumphs of protagonists within novels. In contrast, scholarly essayists find it difficult to achieve this level of emotional connection. Some writers, such as Matthew Arnold, H.G. Wells, Ludvig Holberg, Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig, and Bernhard Severin Ingemann, also became leading activists in shaping education policy.

Yet the level of individual agency does not capture all literary influence. Fictional works vary in their impact and message, as some authors praise the powers that be whereas dissonant voices challenge the status quo. Activist authors must compete for influence with other agents; and political struggles among competing social groups have a powerful influence on educational outcomes. Different types of political systems also mattered to educational choices.

Therefore, we must consider a second *structural* level of literary cultural influence, which is referred to in this book as the "cultural constraint." The cultural constraint constitutes the body of cultural artifacts or touchstones

(symbols, narratives, labels, and mental maps) that appears in literature, accords the text with meaning, is specific to a nation and is passed down from one generation to the next (even as new works are added). This collectively generated repository of cultural touchstones provides a *structure* for cultural reproduction across centuries. Authors inherit cultural symbols and narratives from the literature produced by their ancestors; they rework these cultural tropes from an earlier age to address new challenges; and they pass along the cultural tropes to their literary descendants (Williams 1963). British and Danish writers repeat the master narratives of their countries over time; these narratives persist through critical junctures of education system development and echo across transformations in literary genre, economy, politics, and society.

At this aggregate level, we can see clearly how writers across the political spectrum in each country draw from a common pool of cultural tropes. These cultural touchstones are not deterministic and must be mobilized; yet, rather like institutional path dependencies, the cultural symbols and narratives embedded in fictional worlds preference nationally specific forms of political development. Thus, we may observe at the aggregate level of the cultural constraint some resonance between cross-national differences in literary images of schooling and distinctive choices in education system development.

Computational linguistic processes allow us to observe systematic, empirical differences between British and Danish cultural attitudes about education across over 1,000 works of fiction from 1700 to 1920. In doing so, we can assess whether specific cultural symbols and narratives are more plentiful in one nation's corpus of national literature than in the other nation's, while also tracing how other differences between the two countries have developed over time. Quantitative analyses reveal that British and Danish authors had starkly different understandings of education, the working class, and the state. For example, whereas British authors described schools as meeting individual goals, particularly for upper-class youth, Danish authors much more frequently referenced society and the working class in their depictions of education.

A close reading of some of these British and Danish fictional works allows us to probe more deeply into the cultural frames of each nation to validate the quantitative findings. For example, the enthusiasm for practical skills, as well as academic learning, appears in eighteenth-century Denmark, when Ludvig Holberg depicted diverse types of education as necessary to a well-ordered society. In his 1741 international best-seller, *Niels Klim's Journey under the Earth* (*Niels Klims Underjordiske Reise*), Holberg describes a utopian world called Potu in which schools enable each citizen to contribute to society by equipping them with the necessary skills: "students are employed in solving complicated and difficult questions…No one studies more than one science, and thus each gets a full knowledge of his peculiar subject" (Holberg 1845/1741, Loc. 491). Engagement in esoteric debates (e.g. counting angels on the head of a pin) – a stable of universities in the upper world – is tolerated in Potu only as an amusing spectacle, fit for the stage (Holberg 1845/1741, Loc. 310).

When Klim claims to have been an academic star at the university, his landlord replies that Klim's "diploma might be well enough in Copenhagen, where probably the shadow was regarded more than the substance: the bark more than the sap; but here, where the kernel was more important than aught else, it was of no use" (Loc. 333). In contrast, British writers largely celebrate academic learning, rather than practical skills, as the path for individual self-discovery; for instance, the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is transformed into a sentient being by reading books that awaken "an infinity of new images and feelings…a never-ending source of speculation and astonishment" (Shelley 2015/1818, 83).

British and Danish authors also talk about the working class in radically different ways, which carry important implications for each country's collective views on the role of education. Novelists in Victorian Britain were deeply attuned to the tribulations of the working class; however, they do not portray workers as essential to the nation-building project (Guy 1996; Childers 2001; Dzelzainis 2012). Even those Victorian authors who were most committed to a project of social reform and most sympathetic to workers class often rendered workers as an object of fear and suspicion, liable to devolve into a mob at any time. This was certainly the case in Charlotte Brontë's 1849 novel *Shirley*. According to Brontë, the Luddite mob "hated the machines which they believed took their bread from them; they hated the buildings which contained those machines; they hated the manufacturers who owned those buildings." The protagonist, Shirley, has sympathy for the workers' suffering but ultimately vows to resist their rampage (Brontë 1849/1907, 26–27). In contrast, priest and poet Grundtvig depicted peasants and workers as holding an important role in the cooperative societal project. Every person is important and Grundtvig (1832) famously seeks "Freedom for Loke as well as for Thor."

CULTURE AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

These enduring cultural touchstones, passed down through the ages in the voices of men and women of letters, offer new insights into processes of institutional continuity and change. Relatively autonomous cultural touchstones in forms of art exist somewhat apart from the realm of the political, and these cultural touchstones are recursive and repeating. The transmission of nationally specific cultural touchstones manifest in the cultural literary heritage provides an analytically distinct mechanism from institutional or policy legacies and has bearing on national continuities in the adoption of new policies and institutions.

Thus, cultural symbols and narratives provide a source of continuity even at moments of acute institutional change. Repeating narratives help us to understand the persistence of nationally distinctive ideas about policy reforms, even when paradigm shifts radically transform our ideas about how the world works, and why the *sturm und drang* of pitched policy battles so frequently

results in oddly familiar outcomes (Blyth 2002, Ban 2016). Repeating narratives shed light on enduring ideas about social class, even through shifting power relations (Spillman 2012; Beckert and Bronk 2018). They explain why British elites so often view workers as part of the problem, while Danish elites more consistently consider workers as part of the solution. Repeating narratives reinforce the institutional channels and norms for political negotiation and these narratives reinforce characteristic approaches to problem solving even when the political institutions are themselves transformed (Scott 2001). They explain why issues that are bitterly contested in Britain (where conflict is expected by all parties) are easily negotiated in Denmark (where cooperation is the name of the game).

Granted, the process of reproduction is dynamic, the touchstones change in subtle ways over time, they are mobilized in specific policy struggles and they are not deterministic. By the end of the nineteenth century, education's institutional landscape is densely populated, and powerful interests develop incentives to preserve or to contest the status quo (Ansell and Lindvall 2013). Moreover, fiction writers play a significantly diminished role in contemporary political life, when they must compete for attention with political pundits from think tanks, talk-show hosts, singer-songwriters, comedians, and internet influencers, all striving to define problems according to their cultural and interest-bound world views. Yet, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers wielded remarkable cultural influence in the early origins of modern schooling and the cultural assumptions forged in earlier centuries continue to offer a source of continuity in processes of institutional change.

EDUCATING MARGINAL YOUTH IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The education chronicles from the nineteenth century continue to have meaning for contemporary school reforms. By the twentieth century, nations everywhere struggled to create universal public schools and moved toward greater convergence in their educational institutions (Benavot et al. 1991). Yet twentieth-century British and Danish education choices continued to resonate with nineteenth-century cultural attitudes about the purposes of schooling, views of the lower classes, and the role of government. Despite some attempts to expand vocational training, Britain continued to prioritize academic secondary programs and its limited vocational training programs continued to deliver few certified skills. Denmark expanded its range of secondary vocational education programs, and these elevated workforce skills and increased socioeconomic equality. Paradoxically the British unitary, humanistic secondary schools had received broad support from leftist intellectuals who worried that a two-tiered, class-based system of schooling would hurt the working class. Yet over the course of the twentieth century, countries with the highest levels of educational pluralism had the highest levels of socioeconomic equality and

the best track-record for educating marginally skilled youth; whereas those with more unitary secondary education systems had higher drop-out rates for low-skilled young people (Ryan 2001; Busemeyer 2015).

In recent decades, virtually all western nations have struggled to cope with the diverse educational needs of high-skill knowledge workers and the low-skill, often unemployed precariat. Toward the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, deindustrialization bifurcated work into increasingly segregated high- and low-skill jobs, and western nations confronted the diverse educational needs of both groups. Reformers in both Britain and Denmark strove to balance the goals of education: providing skills for students with a range of competencies while equalizing class disadvantages (Carstensen and Emmenegger 2023).

As British and Danish reformers address these competing aims of education, they seem influenced by the deep-seated cultural predispositions that have appeared in their countries' literature since at least the eighteenth century. British reformers have been leaders in adopting reforms aimed at equalizing educational opportunities among individuals – including national standards, uniform curricula, quality controls, and funding tied to students' test scores (Wolf 2011). Danish bureaucrats have remained more skeptical of these measures, because they fear that these reforms may ill serve societal skills needs. Moreover, they believe that while neoliberal reforms may well give some talented youth from low socioeconomic status backgrounds greater access to quality instruction, these reforms may also exacerbate the educational exclusion of children without strong academic competencies, who require different modes of instruction.

Tales from the nineteenth-century also have relevance for contemporary capacities for collective action, which seem more threatened than ever as cultural wars rock the political foundations for governance across the globe. Neoliberalism, the dominant political ideology for the past four decades, celebrates individualism and the meritocracy, even in this period of rising inequality and resonates with long-standing British cultural frames. Yet mass publics feel excluded from economic gains, unhappy with elite technocratic solutions and blamed by the meritocracy (Mijs 2019). Indeed, populist parties on the right have flourished by using images of traditional societies to attract their frustrated following (Norris and Ingelhart 2018).

Building new visions of society may be necessary for renewed collective action. Nordic cultural images historically were tools for engineering social and economic renewal. Cross-class harmony was rooted in conceptions of a strong society and this overarching commitment to society drove social investments and fortified impulses for cooperation. The incredible power of cultural images encourages us to articulate more clearly the role of cultural touchstones in political contestation and the images that bring people together across class, ethnic, racial, and religious cleavages. Otherwise, the fragmentation of collective identities may be the climate change equivalent of our social world, the biblical-proportioned flood that swamps our political institutions and chances for survival.

A ROADMAP TO THE BOOK

The following chapters present these arguments in greater detail. Chapter 1 explores cross-national differences in education systems and develops a theoretical model to explain how authors help to shape policy reform. Chapter 2 moves beyond the education case to think theoretically about the role of authors in long-term processes of institutional continuity and change. This chapter presents my theory about authors' role in developing national structures of cultural touchstones, how writers act collectively as purveyors of cultural symbols and narratives, and how they transmit these tropes from one generation to the next. Chapter 3 describes how Britain and Denmark began developing mass schooling systems in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Chapter 4 follows these reform efforts through the mid-nineteenth century, as Britain finally developed a public education system and Denmark expanded educational access to non-elites through a private school movement. Chapter 5 explores the creation of secondary education systems at the turn of the twentieth-century. Finally, chapter 6 concludes with a meditation on how cultural values continue to reverberate in struggles to balance efficiency and equality in contemporary education reforms.