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CHAPTER

The Historical Political Economy of Education

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Abstract

Although primary education systems are a central feature of modern states, many students are not acquiring basic skills that improve productivity and social mobility. Looking at history can help explain this disconnection between schooling and learning. Social scientists have disagreed on whether education systems emerged mostly to promote skills or to mold political values and behaviors. They have also disagreed on whether educational expansion was a consequence of democratization and mass demand for social mobility, or an elite-driven process to advance industrialization, nation-building, or state-building goals. This chapter synthesizes recent historical political economy (HPE) studies on the origins, centralization, and expansion of primary education systems, and finds greater empirical support for nation- and state-building theories than for democratization or industrialization theories. While today education systems seek to promote skills for social mobility and economic growth, they are often constrained by institutional foundations that never intended to promote these goals.

Keywords: [education](#), [human capital](#), [indoctrination](#), [democratization](#), [redistribution](#), [industrialization](#), [nation-building](#), [state-building](#), [internal conflict](#), [interstate wars](#)

Education systems today are charged with many responsibilities. Parents expect schools to equip their children with useful knowledge and skills to live empowered, autonomous lives—or, at the very least, to find good jobs. Businesses want education systems to support economic growth and technological progress. Governments also care about the role that schools play in forming good citizens, promoting political legitimacy and social cohesion, and maintaining peace. No other area of state intervention is charged with as many important responsibilities as those we assign to education systems today.

The provision of education is a state matter, but this wasn't always so. Before the nineteenth century, children's education was typically left to families and religious organizations; the notion that a centralized political authority could be a legitimate actor in regulating and providing education for young children was inconceivable for most people. Today, by contrast, states regulate, fund, manage, and monitor schools; set curriculum guidelines and teacher certification requirements; dictate the duration of compulsory schooling; determine whether education is free; and make other policy decisions that affect both the quantity and quality of schooling, most often throughout the national territory.

While centralized state intervention, particularly at the primary school level, helps explain the remarkable expansion of access to basic schooling over the last two centuries, when it comes to the quality of education, the picture is less encouraging. Yes, children have access to education at unprecedented levels: in the early nineteenth century only 5 percent of children were enrolled in school, whereas today every region in the world has reached universal or near-universal primary education. But many students who attend school regularly are not acquiring the kinds of knowledge and skills that enhance productivity, expand career choices, and enable social mobility. Across countries, the correlation between average years of schooling and reading and math skills is close to zero (Paglayan 2021). The disjoint between access to schooling and student learning, or between educational quantity and quality, is indeed the most important challenge facing education systems today (World Bank 2018). Why should this be?

Looking at history can teach us a lot about the characteristics, accomplishments, and challenges of present-day education systems. One common perspective locates the roots of modern systems' failure to promote reading and math skills in recent education policies. From this perspective, politicians *want* to promote skills but, because of limited technical knowledge about the consequences of different education policies, adopt policies that are not conducive to student learning, giving way to a recent "learning crisis" (World Bank 2018). An alternative perspective I have proposed elsewhere is that the low quality of present-day education systems has deep historical roots (Paglayan 2017; 2022). From this perspective, failure to teach basic reading and math skills is not a recent phenomenon but reflects the fact that promoting these goals was *not* a major driver of the emergence, design, and historical expansion of state-regulated education systems. Recent evidence provides some support for this perspective, showing that educational quality remained stable in most countries since at least the mid-twentieth century (Le Nestour, Moscovitz, and Sandefur 2021). Schools today teach knowledge and skills (only) as well as they did seven decades ago.

While in principle it is possible that education systems emerged in response to societal pressure to promote skills and social mobility, it is also possible that central governments took control of education systems to legitimate the existing social order and, with that, perpetuate the existing distribution of political and economic power. By the end of the chapter, it will become clearer that there is relatively more empirical support for the latter view. In particular, mass education systems were conceived as crucial policy tools for accomplishing both nation- and state-building goals. By contrast, governments historically gave much less importance to mass education's potential to improve individual earnings and promote economic growth than they do today.

I reach these conclusions based on a review of the historical political economy (HPE) literature on the origins, centralization, and expansion of state-regulated primary education systems. I do not examine the HPE of educational quality or educational equity because the literature on these topics is currently too sparse. I focus on primary education systems because they provide the foundation for all subsequent learning and represent the type of schooling available to most people. For this reason, and in line with much research, I use the terms “primary,” “basic,” and “mass” education interchangeably. While the general conclusions I extract are based on my interpretation of HPE studies that use quantitative data and econometric methods to study the history of education systems, it is important to acknowledge that a vast literature exists on the history of education. Reviewing this broader literature exceeds the scope of this chapter and volume, but a deep understanding of the origins and evolution of education systems undoubtedly requires considering both HPE studies and the work of historians.

The chapter is organized as follows. I begin by presenting a conceptual framework to help readers organize and integrate the literature. The framework highlights that different political and economic actors will want schools to pursue different goals; whose interests prevail will shape the character of education systems. I then use this framework to identify and classify four common HPE theories of education: democratization, industrialization, nation-building, and state-building theories. Next, I review what recent HPE research has to say about the plausibility of each theory. I conclude by outlining important questions for future research and discuss how a knowledge of history can inform current debates about education reform.

The Why and the Who of Education Reform: A Conceptual Framework

To organize and synthesize the large body of HPE studies, I use a conceptual framework that proposes that existing political economy theories of education differ from each other along two crucial dimensions: what they argue is the main goal of education, and who they argue is the main actor behind education reform. Different political and economic actors will want schools to pursue different goals in different circumstances; what circumstances obtain and whose interests prevail will shape education policy decisions, including the decision to centralize, fund, and expand education systems as well as the characteristics of these systems.

With respect to the question “What is the main goal of education systems?”, I classify existing theories into two groups: those that argue or assume that the main goal of education systems is to teach skills, and those that argue or assume that their main goal is to mold individual values. By “skills” I mean the knowledge, practical or abstract, that enhances individual and economic productivity. Political economy theories that propose that education systems promote economic growth, poverty reduction, social mobility, income equality, and technological progress are indeed united by the assumption that education systems are designed to teach skills. The term “values” encompasses the beliefs, attitudes, ideologies, and behaviors that constitute an individual’s character. Theories that propose that education systems promote good citizenship, a strong national identity, obedience to authority, or adherence to a particular political ideology, to name just some examples, all emphasize the transmission of values as the main goal of education systems. In practice, education systems seek to teach both skills and values, but because school time is limited, there is a trade-off between how much time can be devoted to each. Existing theories make varied claims about which of these goals was prioritized when states decided to centralize and expand access to primary education.

The second dimension along which theories of education differ is in their answer to “Who was the main actor behind the expansion of primary education?”. Here again I group theories into two categories: those that argue that education policies are responsive to pressure from below—what many theories call “the masses”—and those that argue that the emergence and expansion of state-regulated education systems was an elite-driven process. Within this second group, theories differ in terms of whether they emphasize the role of economic elites such as industrialists, or of political elites such as national politicians. We will examine these distinctions later in the chapter.

Table 1 summarizes how this simple framework can clarify the main differences between four common theories of what drove states to centralize and expand access to primary education. First, the **democratization theory** argues that states expanded access to schooling in response to widespread pressure from newly enfranchised citizens, particularly those from less affluent backgrounds, who demanded education so that their children could gain the knowledge and skills needed to get good jobs and climb the social ladder. Second, the **industrialization theory** also argues that the centralization and expansion of education systems sought to teach skills to the population, but instead of locating the source of this expansion in pressure from below, it contends that governments invested in education in response to pressure from economic elites who demanded a skilled workforce to support industrialization. Third, the **nation-building theory** and the **state-building theory** refer to a class of value-centered theories that maintain that national governments centralized and expanded primary education systems out of self-interest in order to inculcate a national identity (nation-building), or to teach obedience and respect for the state and its laws (state-building). Like the industrialization theory, these theories propose an elite-driven process of educational expansion, but while industrialization theory highlights the role of education systems in teaching skills, both the nation- and state-building theories stress schools' role in molding political values and behaviors.

Table 1. Goals and actors behind education reform: a conceptual framework

Main Actor Pushing for Public Education Provision			
		The masses	Elites
Main Goal of Public Education Is to Teach	Skills	Democratization theory	Industrialization theory
	Values		Nation-building theory State-building theory

What do HPE studies tell us about the plausibility of these theories? The answer depends on what time period we examine. To preview an important conclusion from the next section, theories that conceptualize the expansion of primary education as an effort to equip people with useful skills find some support in recent decades, but find relatively little support when we consider the origins and expansion of primary education systems from the 1800s to the 1960s. For this earlier and longer period, the existing evidence suggests that value-based theories better explain the rise and expansion of primary education systems. This conclusion has important implications for our understanding of the challenges facing current education systems, an issue I return to at the end of the chapter.

What We Know about the Historical Political Economy of Education

To extract conclusions about what we have learned so far from HPE research about primary education systems, I first consider skills-based theories that assume that the expansion of mass education sought to teach knowledge and skills that enhance economic productivity, and then turn to value-based theories that propose that the main goal of primary education systems was to mold political values and behaviors. I consider not only the claims made by different studies but also the quality of the data and methods underlying those claims. As will become evident, some claims are more rigorously supported than others. This is to be expected; methods evolve and improve over time, which helps us reach progressively more reliable conclusions. For that same reason, readers should view this section as a synthesis of what we know so far, keeping in mind that future studies may lead us to revise some of these conclusions.

“Governments Provide Education in Response to Mass Demand for Skills and Social Mobility”

Democratization theory has been the most influential political economy theory of education provision of the last thirty years. However, recent research casts doubt on its ability to explain the rise and expansion of mass education systems. The theory’s core theoretical prediction is that democratization—especially the extension of the franchise to the lower classes, who presumably were historically more excluded from and more interested in education—leads to an increase in both the quantity and quality of primary education. Underlying this prediction are four assumptions: one, educational quantity and quality go hand in hand, or, put differently, attending school leads to the acquisition of useful knowledge and skills; two, for this reason, schooling is universally demanded by parents; three, at the time when countries transitioned from nondemocracy to democracy, a majority of the population lacked access to, and demanded, primary schooling; and four, democratic regimes are more responsive to citizens’ demands than nondemocratic ones.

The first assumption—that the quantity and quality of education move together—does not find much empirical support today. For over a decade, the World Bank has been arguing that developing countries face a “learning crisis” in which schooling does not lead to learning (World Bank 2011), and we know from Paglayan (2021) that a country’s average years of schooling, a common measure of the quantity of education, is a poor predictor of the level of math skills among students (the correlation is almost zero).

Despite this disjunction between quantity and quality, it is still possible that democratic governments expanded education systems in an effort to address the demand for skills from the population, even if those efforts ultimately failed to accomplish that goal. (After all, there are countless examples of education reforms that have failed to meet their stated goal.) If this were true, we should observe that democratization led to an expansion of access to, and investment in, primary education systems, as measured by school enrollment rates and education expenditures, regardless of whether this was accompanied by an improvement in skills. This is precisely the question on which empirical tests of democratization theory have focused.

The conclusion that democratization and the extension of suffrage rights to the lower classes was a leading driver of the expansion of primary education around the world stems from studies produced before the causal inference revolution in the social sciences. In the late 1990s, as social scientists grappled with the puzzling absence of solid evidence that democracies are better at promoting economic growth than autocracies, a new pro-democracy argument emerged that held that democracies *are* better at promoting education and human capital (Baum and Lake 2003). In economics, Stanley Engerman, Elisa Mariscal, and Kenneth Sokoloff were among the first to document a correlation between suffrage and school enrollment rates in the Americas during the nineteenth century, a finding they interpreted as evidence that a more equal distribution of political power *leads to* greater incentives to provide public services (Engerman and Sokoloff 2002; Mariscal and Sokoloff 2000). Peter Lindert provided additional support for the democratization thesis based on an analysis of the relationship between democracy and primary school enrollment rates in twenty-one developed countries from 1880 to 1930. In his book *Growing Public*, Lindert (2004, 105) concludes that “the spread of democratic voting rights played a leading role in explaining ... the rise of primary schooling.” This conclusion was further popularized by Acemoglu and Robinson’s (2006) book *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, which cites Lindert’s findings as evidence that democratization leads to pro-poor redistributive policies, including primary education. Political science also contributed to this consensus. For example, focusing on cross-national data from the 1960s onward, early studies interpreted the cross-sectional pattern that primary school enrollment rates are higher in democratic than nondemocratic regimes as evidence that democratic institutions “have an important effect on primary school enrollment” (Brown 1999, 681). Other studies analyzed temporal changes in education spending among countries that transitioned to democracy after the 1960s; noticing an uptick in spending after democratization, they also concluded that democracy leads to increased spending on primary education (e.g., Brown and Hunter 2004; Stasavage 2005; Ansell 2010). The consensus around these conclusions was such that several surveys of the literature characterize as an established truth the argument that democracies provide higher quantities of education (Busemeyer and Trampusch 2011; Gift and Wibbels 2014; Hoffman 2015).

A more recent wave of studies, however, suggests a very different story—one in which mass demand for education and the enfranchisement of the lower classes played, at best, a minor role in explaining the expansion of primary education systems. In my own work, I reexamined the relationship between democratization and school enrollment rates using modern causal inference tools and analyzing data for 109 countries from 1830 to 2010, thus covering more countries and a longer time period than previous research (Paglayan 2021). After netting out (a) the fact that countries that historically had higher primary school enrollment rates were more likely to eventually become democratic and (b) the fact that countries that remained nondemocratic experienced the same uptick in primary school enrollment rates and education spending seen in those that democratized, I no longer find evidence to support the claim that democratization was an important driver of the global expansion of primary education. Aghion et al. (2019) arrive at a similar conclusion about the spurious nature of the positive relationship between democracy and primary school enrollment rates. Their study highlights that democratization often coincided with interstate wars, which can provide incentives to expand mass education to train loyal and skilled soldiers. After netting out the effect of these wars on primary school enrollment rates, they find, democratization no longer plays a role in explaining the expansion of primary schooling.

Why didn’t democratization lead to the expansion of primary schooling? Is it because a majority of voters did not actually demand this, or is it because democracies are not in fact more responsive to voters’ demands than nondemocracies? Paglayan (2021) explores both possibilities and finds more support for the first interpretation than for the second. That is, although much research suggests that many policy decisions in democratic settings are captured by the rich, when it comes to the quantity of primary education, democracies do seem to be responsive to what a majority of voters want. In particular, when a majority of voters lack access to primary education, democratization does lead to the expansion of primary schooling. However, historically, this condition has rarely been met. On average, 70 percent of the school-age population was already enrolled in primary school *before* countries transitioned to democracy. In these cases, a majority of voters most likely did not demand increased access to primary schooling because they already had access to it before democracy emerged.

These findings shift the conversation from a focus on the effect of democratization on access to primary schooling to the question of why nondemocracies have historically provided high quantities of it. One possibility is that nondemocratic regimes expanded primary schooling because they wanted to cater to the needs of lower-class citizens. This could be the case among nondemocracies that embrace a left-wing ideology or need the lower class to survive. This argument has some support during the second half of the twentieth century (Manzano 2017). However, left-wing autocracies cannot explain the rise and rapid expansion of state-regulated primary education systems in nineteenth-century Europe and Latin America, simply because there were no left-wing autocracies at that time (Paglayan 2021; 2022).

In principle, it could still be the case that nonprogressive rulers engaged in progressive redistributive policies in order to keep the population content and avoid rebellion against the regime. That is, perhaps the expansion of education in nondemocracies, even ones that were not left-wing, responded to pressure from below. However, what most studies suggest is that nondemocracies expanded primary education systems during the nineteenth and early twentieth century despite the fact that the masses were largely uninterested in sending their children to school. Several studies document that parental demand for education was particularly low in rural areas and agrarian economies, where families relied on child labor for agricultural productivity (Cinnirella and Hornung 2016; Baker 2015; Baker, Blanchette, and Eriksson 2020). This did not stop countries—particularly in Europe—from expanding primary education while they were still primarily rural. Nineteenth-century Sweden provides an example of rapid expansion of primary education under a primarily rural economy. Andersson and Berger (2019) use municipal data on suffrage rights and educational expenditures to show that during the 1870s, when enrollment in primary education was near universal but the level of expenditure in primary schools differed considerably across municipalities, investments in schooling were greater not in those municipalities with a more extensive franchise but in those where voting rights were restricted to a small and wealthy elite. Nineteenth-century Swedish elites, they argue, supported mass schooling because of its promise as a mechanism of enlightenment and social control, whereas most parents, by contrast, were uninterested in schooling because it competed with their children's work responsibilities. Evidence from Italy between 1870 and 1911, a period when access to voting rights expanded at different rates across provinces, also suggests that the extension of the franchise played no role in explaining which provinces invested more in primary education (Cappelli 2016). In France, too, the national government under the July Monarchy (1830–1848) promoted an unprecedented expansion of primary schooling even though, as Squicciarini and Voigtländer (2016) document, demand for education from the lower classes was low.

In sum, recent studies challenge three assumptions of the democratization theory of mass education provision: first, the idea that schooling results in human capital accumulation; second, the belief that education is universally demanded by parents; and third, the assumption that at the time when countries transitioned from nondemocracy to democracy, a majority of the population lacked access to primary education. What these studies suggest is that nondemocracies often provided high access to primary education even in contexts where parental demand for primary education was low.

“Governments Provide Education in Response to Economic Elites’ Pressure for a Skilled Workforce”

Even if democratization was not a major driver of the expansion of mass education systems in most parts of the world, it is still possible that the main goal behind these systems' expansion was to provide skills to the population—not because of demand from below but because of elites' demands for a skilled workforce. This is what the industrialization theory argues. The basic idea is that technology has become increasingly dependent on skilled workers over time (Galor and Moav 2000; Goldin and Katz 2009), creating an increasing complementarity between physical capital and skills. As a result of this process of technological change, capitalists have increasingly pressured governments to provide mass education to the working class so that workers have the skills that capitalists need to maximize their profits (Galor and Moav 2000; 2002; 2006). In particular, the theory predicts that industrialization will create a new economic elite that both needs skilled workers and has the power to pressure governments to supply these workers through investments in mass education. Moreover, according to this theory, capitalists' demand for education provision will increase over time as technology becomes more complex and more dependent on the availability of human capital.

Existing studies provide mixed support for the view that the economic needs of the industrial and capital-owning class were an important driver of the expansion of primary education systems. On one hand, there is considerable evidence from England (Mitch 1998; Clark 2005), France (Squicciarini and Voigtländer 2015), and Europe generally (Allen 2003; Mokyr 1990; 2005) suggesting that the First Industrial Revolution did not require a large skilled workforce, but instead relied on a few “knowledge elites” who could contribute scientific discoveries and technological innovation. On the contrary, several studies find that the wage premium for skilled workers declined during the First Industrial Revolution, suggesting that industrial elites demanded more *unskilled* labor—a phenomenon that has led economic historians to refer to the first phase of industrialization as “deskilling.”

Of course, it could still be that governments expanded primary education during this period if they mistakenly believed that it would support the industrialization process. However, existing studies suggest that this was not the case. England, for example, was a laggard in primary education provision with respect to the rest of Europe throughout most of the nineteenth century. In a study of literacy rates, enrollment rates, and number of schools in England from 1300 to 1900, de Pleijt (2018) finds evidence of a strong decline in schooling from the 1720s to the 1880s. It was only with Forster’s Elementary Education Act of 1870 that the central government began to make considerable efforts to catch up with the rest of the region in education—a full century after the introduction of steam power (Green 1990). In France, on the other hand, central government intervention in primary education began much earlier, in 1833, when parliament passed the country’s first national law of primary education, the Guizot Law, which established a national school curriculum and required municipalities to establish primary schools for boys. The result of this law was the most rapid expansion in the number of primary schools and in enrollment rates seen in French history (Grew and Harrigan 1991). Because this expansion also coincided with France’s first industrialization, an important question is whether the two phenomena were causally related. The answer appears to be no: In a study of the differential rates of expansion of primary schooling across municipalities during the July Monarchy, Squicciarini and Voigtländer (2016) find that primary schooling expanded because of the pressure exerted by intellectual, not industrial, elites. Also focusing on early nineteenth-century France, Montalbo (2020) finds that although more industrialized municipalities had more resources to support the creation of public primary schools, industrial activities led to a reduction in school enrollment rates because industrialists during this period relied heavily on unskilled workers.

On the other hand, economic needs do appear to have played a role in triggering educational expansion during the Second Industrial Revolution and in more recent time periods. For example, Ansell (2008), Avelino, Brown, and Hunter (2005), and Kaufman and Segura-Ubiergo (2001) find cross-national evidence consistent with the argument that educational expansion from the 1960s onward increased because firms exposed to globalization required an increasingly skilled workforce to remain competitive. The Prussian case provides a good illustration of how the relationship between industrialization and mass education provision changed over time, from the absence of a relationship during early periods of industrialization that did not require a skilled workforce, to a positive relationship during later periods when industrialization *has* relied on skilled workers. During the early history of educational expansion in Prussia in the late 1700s, most of the state’s effort to promote primary schooling was focused on rural, not industrializing, areas (Melton 2002). However, by the beginning of the twentieth century, cities with a larger industrial economy were likely to invest more in education than less industrialized areas (Hollenbach 2021).

To recap, the discussion so far points to two important questions that neither democratization nor industrialization theory can answer. First, why did nondemocratic regimes provide widespread access to primary education even in the absence of mass demand for it? Second, why did many nineteenth-century governments promote primary education even though their economies remained largely agrarian or were undergoing early industrialization processes that did not require a skilled workforce?

One possibility is that the expansion of primary education systems was an elite-driven process that responded not to economic elites' demand for skills but to the interests of political elites who believed that their permanence in power required shaping the values and behaviors of future citizens. From this perspective, mass education is used as a social control tool more than anything else, a conceptualization that is adopted by two main theories: theories of education as *nation-building* and theories of education as *state-building*. Both theories share an emphasis on elites' interest in molding values and behaviors, but, as I discuss next, advance different arguments about the types of values and behaviors that education systems prioritized, make different predictions about the conditions under which governments invested in mass education, and rely on different pieces of evidence to back them up.

“Governments Provide Education out of Their Own Interest in Nation-Building”

Growing awareness about the limitations of the democratization and industrialization theories of education provision has been accompanied by a shift in scholars' attention to a set of explanations that stress not the role of education systems in promoting human capital accumulation but their nation-building role. Nation-building theories propose that the main goal of education systems is—or at least was—to teach a common language (Gellner 1983), inculcate emotional attachment to an imagined national community (Anderson 1983), and promote a national identity. There is growing evidence from HPE studies that states became increasingly interested in regulating and expanding primary education systems because of these systems' nation-building potential (Darden and Grzymala-Busse 2006; Ansell and Lindvall 2013; Darden and Mylonas 2015), albeit with varying levels of success in accomplishing that goal (Cinnirella and Schueler 2018; cf. Fouka 2020; Bazzi, Himly, and Marx 2021).

What is less clear is what conditions or factors prompted states to become interested in the nation-building role of primary education systems. Based on common beliefs about the economic and political benefits of nation-building, social scientists have proposed two main factors that incentivized states to turn to mass schooling to accomplish their nation-building goals: industrialization and interstate military rivalry. The argument that industrialization and economic modernization provides incentives for nation-building has received considerable attention owing to the influential work of Ernest Gellner (1983), who argues that industrialization required everyone to speak the same language, the nation's language, in order for workers to communicate efficiently with one another and with their supervisors. Much research has focused on the relationship between economic modernization and nation-building in France, with Eugene Weber (1976) being a key proponent of the relationship between these variables. However, recent HPE studies challenge Gellner's argument and Weber's interpretation of the history of French schooling. While there is little doubt that one of the goals of the primary education law of 1833, or Guizot Law, was to ensure that French was spoken by everyone across the territory, and there is evidence that the resulting expansion of schooling indeed helped reach this goal (Blanc and Kubo 2021), industrialization does not appear to explain the impetus for educational expansion during this foundational period in the history of education in France (Squicciarini and Voigtländer 2016; Montalbo 2020).

Another condition that may provide states with incentives to nation-build through mass schooling is the presence of interstate military rivalry. According to proponents of this argument, interstate wars, especially those involving territorial threats from neighbor states, were crucial drivers of the centralization and expansion of primary education (Ramirez and Boli 1987). Such wars not only increased the state's need for skilled and loyal soldiers—which, in principle, education systems could help train—but also its need to teach patriotism and instill nationalist sentiment from a young age to inoculate the population from rival states' claims. This, the argument goes, helped prevent defection to foreign countries, of particular interest to states under foreign threat. While arguments about the role of interstate military rivalry have been part of the vast literature on the history of education systems for a long time, only recently have they gained attention in HPE. In a recent study, Aghion et al. (2019) find support for the interstate military rivalry theory among European countries from 1830 to 2010, and among a larger set of 166 countries from 1945 to 2010.¹

An open question is why some countries engaged in considerable expansion of primary education even in the absence of interstate wars. France again is a useful example. While many have argued that France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 helped propel the education reforms of the 1880s, most of its primary school expansion took place during the 1830s as a result of the Guizot Law of 1833, approved in a context of relative peace with neighbors. Similarly, Latin America during the nineteenth century led the expansion of primary education within the developing world, even though interstate wars in the region were relatively uncommon. As I argue in the next section, *state-building* theories of education can help explain a variety of landmark education laws and periods of mass education expansion, including the French education reforms of the 1830s, the expansion of primary schooling in nineteenth-century Latin America, and the introduction of compulsory schooling laws across the United States.

“Governments Provide Education out of Their Own Interest in State-Building”

State-building theories of education propose that states regulate and expand mass schooling first and foremost to consolidate the power of a centralized political authority, that is, the state. Such theories have a long tradition among historians but have attracted the attention of the HPE community only very recently. There are many ways in which education systems could in principle help consolidate the power of a central political authority. First, by targeting children at an age when their minds are more susceptible, schools can inculcate in future citizens moral and civic values and behaviors of discipline, obedience, and respect for the state's authority, thus helping to prevent future political instability, rebellion, violence, crime, and dissident behavior (Paglayan 2022). Second, central governments seeking to consolidate their control in the periphery can hire teachers and school inspectors and deploy them as agents of the state to monitor remote communities and regions (Cermeño, Enflo, and Lindvall 2022). Third, teaching everyone to speak the language preferred by national elites can help the state communicate and enforce laws and collect taxes, two central features of strong states (Scott 1998; Lee and Zhang 2017; Zhang and Lee 2020).

While both nation- and state-building theories of education propose an elite-driven process of educational expansion to mold values and behaviors, key differences exist. First, nation-building theories stress the role that schools play in instilling patriotism or support for one's country as opposed to other countries. By contrast, state-building theories stress schools' role in teaching loyalty to the state as opposed to other competing domestic authorities such as local governments or churches. Second, nation-building theories focus primarily on the role that schools play in teaching a common language. By contrast, state-building theories focus on schools' role in teaching civic duties and moral values and behaviors of discipline, obedience, and respect for the state and its laws. Sometimes, as in nineteenth-century France, state-building goals can encompass nation-building tools; that is, teaching a common language can help accomplish the broader political goal of consolidating the state's authority. However, not all efforts to promote state-building through mass education will include a nation-building component. In several cases, such as Prussia and Argentina, mass education was used as a state-building tool well before central governments turned to schooling as a means to forge a national identity and promote nationalist sentiments (Paglayan 2022).

What prompted central governments' interest in the state-building potential of primary education systems? Elsewhere (Paglayan 2017; 2022) I have proposed that states became increasingly interested in the potential of mass education systems to promote long-term political stability when faced with internal conflict concerns and the inability to ensure social order through traditional policy tools such as repression and redistribution. Fearing the breakdown of social order in the absence of innovative policy tools, states turned to primary education systems, regulating and expanding them to promote long-term social order by indoctrinating young children to accept the status quo, behave as “good citizens,” and respect the state and its laws.

This political economy argument highlighting the role of internal conflict and social disorder in driving the centralization and expansion of mass education systems offers a unifying theoretical framework for seemingly disconnected findings about the role of civil wars, social revolutions, ethnic mobilization, and immigration waves in driving educational expansion. In my own work, I find evidence that nondemocratic rulers in Europe and Latin America responded to civil wars—an extreme form of internal conflict—by expanding primary education for the masses, an effort that is not explained by liberals coming to power as a result of these wars, nor by war-induced improvements in state capacity or attempts to appease discontented sectors of society through redistribution (Paglayan 2017; 2022). In a similar spirit and building on this work, Alesina, Giuliano, and Reich (2021) argue that nondemocratic elites facing the threat of social revolution and democratization are likely to turn to mass education to teach people that the status quo is not as bad as they might think. Moving away from class conflict to consider instead ethnic and religious conflict, Bozcaga and Cansunar (2021) find that in Turkey the central government expanded primary education in Kurdish villages after Kurds began to mobilize against the state, a finding that the authors interpret as evidence of the social control purpose of education in contexts of political instability. Another example comes from the United States during the Age of Mass Migration, when the arrival of Catholic immigrants from Europe provoked fear among traditional White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant elites (Tyack 1974). In particular, beliefs about the “moral deficiency” of these newly arrived immigrants and their presumed greater tendency to commit crimes and disrupt public life triggered a wave of state compulsory schooling laws designed to ensure that everyone learned civic values and behaviors of discipline conducive to political stability (Bandiera et al. 2019). Revealingly, and against a nation-building interpretation of these laws, states that received immigrants from parts of Europe that already had compulsory schooling were slower in introducing their own compulsory schooling laws, suggesting that elites were not interested so much in inculcating an “American” identity as they were in molding general moral and civic values.²

The HPE literature has devoted remarkably little attention to the role that education systems played in state-building efforts. Understanding the types of internal conflict that prompted state-building through mass schooling (e.g., center vs. periphery, elites vs. the masses, church vs. state, intra-elite conflict, etc.), how education systems were designed in order to accomplish their state-building goal, and whether they actually succeeded in promoting long-term social order also remain crucial questions for future research. Refining the conditions under which elites are likely to turn to education for state-building purposes would also be useful.

Open Questions

The HPE literature to date has focused primarily on explaining the centralization and expansion of mass schooling. We know much less, for example, about why some countries are more successful than others at promoting skills, or what explains the varying levels of socioeconomic, gender, and ethnic disparities in educational access and quality across countries. For example, it could be that even though the spread of democracy played a minor role in explaining the expansion of access to primary schooling, it did lead to improvements in educational quality or equity. Research on the political economy of educational quality and educational equity should undoubtedly constitute the next generation of studies on education systems.

Another question that has received relatively scant attention in quantitative HPE studies—but has received much attention from historians—is how religious conflict has shaped education systems. It is well known that, historically, religious actors (churches, missionaries, etc.) were the main providers of education. Indeed, the history of public education systems over the last two hundred years in most parts of the world is one in which states gradually took over many if not all of the educational functions previously carried out by religious actors, and reshaped education systems to meet the state’s need. This process predictably entailed considerable political conflict (Ansell and Lindvall 2013). How this conflict played out and shaped school curricula, teacher training, education funding, the supervision of schools, and the relative size of public versus private school options are important questions for future research.

Finally, we know considerably more about the political factors that shaped the expansion of education systems than we do about the political consequences of this expansion. While many primary education systems were designed to accomplish nation- and state-building goals, the extent to which they succeeded, and the conditions under which they did, remain less understood. In some cases, education systems appear to have successfully established a common national identity (Blanc and Kubo 2021), whereas in other cases, they failed to do so (Fouka 2020). Understanding these varied outcomes will require scholars to abandon a monolithic understanding of “education systems” to consider instead the differences in the content of education; the varying ways in which teachers are recruited, trained, and monitored; and the consequences of these education policies.

Conclusion

The history of education systems is relevant not only to social scientists interested in understanding how the world works but also to anyone interested in improving modern education systems. Across countries today, considerable access to schooling coexists with glaring failures on the part of schools to promote skills. Some social scientists have recommended to rectify this situation by conducting experimental studies that identify cost-effective education interventions to promote skills. This chapter provides an alternative perspective based on the findings of HPE studies. These studies suggest that the historical emergence and expansion of mass education systems was primarily an elite-driven process that sought to shape the political values and behaviors of the population to create loyal and well-behaved future citizens. The characteristics of education systems reflected those goals, from regimented school curricula to the teacher-centered design of classrooms. In recent decades, the goals of education have shifted, and educational reforms have been introduced to reduce income inequality, promote economic growth, and empower citizens. However, the success of these reforms largely rests on institutional foundations inherited from over a century ago that never intended for citizens to be empowered or for schools to promote social mobility. Coming to terms with this incongruity is essential to understand and improve modern education systems.

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Notes

- 1 Darden and Mylonas (2015) argue that the extent to which new independent states worry about enforcing their borders and, therefore, invest in nation-building and language homogenization will depend on how they became independent. Countries that fought independence wars, they argue, will invest more in nation-building than newly independent states whose borders were fixed by international agreements.

In all these cases, elites believed that mass schooling would promote obedience and social order. An important question is how racism and xenophobia shape elites' beliefs about who could be "civilized" or not. In the United States during the nineteenth century, for example, politicians who viewed the arrival of Catholic European immigrants as a threat to social order turned to compulsory schooling because they indeed believed that these immigrants could be "civilized" through public schools. However, White plantation owners did not turn to education as a means of promoting orderly behavior among enslaved Black people, both because they feared that teaching slaves how to read would empower them to rebel and because they viewed individuals of African descent as inferior and ineducable.