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A Review of Dorn's *Creating the Dropout*

Sherman Dorn. (1996) *Creating the Dropout: An Institutional and Social History of School*. Praeger. \$55.00.

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Let me recommend Sherman Dorn's new book, *Creating the Dropout*. The book undertakes a scholarly trek through the rhetoric of school leaving, construing economic and political vagaries as the occasions for a manufactured problem. At the end of the trip, the sympathetic reader is left wondering why he or she wasn't politically savvy enough back then to desert high school or, at the very least, to boycott the graduation ceremony.

Interesting as the historical journey proves, it somehow evades theoretical mapping, and this is a major weakness in an otherwise well-crafted effort. Throughout my reading, I kept taking side trips on my own to better situate Dorn's aims and interpretations. These provide a contrapuntal low road to the high one that Dorn has us travel.

Dorn begins his historical interpretation with a paradox: As increasing numbers of teenagers attended and graduated from high school, increasing rhetorical attention was drawn to the "dropout". This attention, however, took various forms at first, which crystallized into a set of predictable, stereotypic assertions in the 1960s. By the mid-1960s, in other words, graduation from high-school had become an age norm . But was failure to graduate really a crisis, either for the individual or for society? Or was its significance, its status as a "crisis" manufactured? In Dorn's view, the "drop-out" was invented, not discovered:

...dropping out in itself was not a primary concern of educators until the mid-twentieth century. Many of the issues we think of today as connecting with dropping out--the need to socialize children, the response of schools to urban poverty, the economic promise of education, and the problems of children who have

academic difficulties in school--have appeared frequently without being part of an explicit discussion about dropping out. Only after 1960 did they become commonly identified as part of a specific problem called "dropping out." Concerns about dependency, the belief in schools' ability to improve the poor, and the expectation that all teenagers should be in school gelled in the dropout debate. Then educators struggled to respond to the "new" issue of dropping out. (p. 80)

The invention of the dropout was, according to Dorn, a way for schools and the media to channel and thus contain more general concerns about the condition of cities. Unlike the structural conditions of poverty or the irrelevance of the school curriculum, the dropout could be blamed for his (the invented dropout was most often male) own circumstances. Furthermore, he could be assigned blame for the increasing unrest within urban communities. In this manner, the effects of racism in the school and workplace, inadequate basic education, and unresponsive social services could be discounted. Schools and other government bodies could distance themselves, when the problems of the cities were attributed to some combination of inadequate upbringing, cultural disadvantage, and personal dereliction.

Dorn's explanation is compelling, and he supports it through a careful review of relevant professional literature about education as well as through an analysis of primary documents from three cities. Nevertheless, it is an interpretive claim, and its positioning as interpretation is not well enough explored. Because he avoids theoretical and methodological issues, Dorn leaves the reader to discover (or allows the reader to ignore) the sources of and supports for his underlying theoretical premise-- that discourse can invent social reality.

The tendency to draw this sort of conclusion has its own history, of course, and my first side trip was to find sources of this presumption. A cursory visit to the library catalog allowed me to identify an entire genre in historical and social science literature devoted to uncovering the social manufacture of certain real things that we all appear to take for granted, childhood, for example, (Aries, 1962), the "crisis of education" (Berliner, 1995), giftedness (Margolin, 1994), madness (Szasz, 1974). The analyses differ, but the leitmotifs are the same: the social world is something of our own making, not everything is what it seems. This approach to analysis, for which we might as well blame Marx (the hidden workings of the social relations of production) and Freud (the hidden psycho sexual motive) is itself an invention of discourse. Dorn, like the rest of us, is to some extent trapped in his own trap. In a world made of discourse, what truth claims can any discourse support? I found myself wishing that Dorn had wrestled more thoroughly with this fundamental question of purpose and method.

It would be unfair, however, to accuse Dorn of ignoring the question completely. He did deal with it in the context of his analysis of the rhetoric of "dropping out", but he construed it narrowly as if to imply that his own discourse and its moorings in a particular literature were somehow immune. His framing of the question looked something like this: Why was the social construction of the dropout crisis irrational? To understand what Dorn must mean by "rational," we can look at his answer:

First, the perceived crisis was not in response to a real demographic trend; graduation became more, not less, prevalent in the middle twentieth century. Second, the perceived crisis did not lead to effective or even widespread policy changes. Third, the public debate over dropping out omitted issues and perspectives that a rational discussion should have included. (p. 99)

This answer suggests that a "rational" social construction would correspond to "the facts", support improvements, and attend to all the relevant issues. But isn't this asking too much of social construction? After all, the premise that something (the dropout, for instance) can be created out of the discourse surrounding it--in other words, can be interpreted into existence-

-suggests the presence, and in a logical sense, necessity, of multiple interpretations. If the facts manifested themselves apart from interpretation, we wouldn't need or, for that matter, even be able to tolerate discourse that subverted the self-evident "truth."

But facts, particularly about human enterprises, do not come to us that way. Nor do our interpretations, however earnest, require ameliorative action. Furthermore, interpretation, by its very nature, includes some and excludes other perspectives. In consideration of these features of interpretation, Dorn's invocation of the "rational" sounds antiquated and hollow. Rather than basing his claims on the impossible distinction between "rational" and "irrational" interpretations, Dorn would have been better served by examining the dynamics of conflict within the discourse itself. And to a certain extent--for example in his comparison of the Philadelphia school systems' claims about dropouts and the competing claims of a civil rights organization in West Philadelphia--he did. Nevertheless, this stance does not permeate the entire work. And, in my view, it should.

The most important side trip for me, then, involved reconstructing Dorn's argument in view of the assumption that the "dropout crisis"--by virtue of the fact that it could be nothing other than a social construct--was rational according to some logic. Finding the logic behind the construct became the purpose of my divagation. This low road came curiously close to the path that Dorn took in the final chapter of the book. But the divergences were also telling.

For Dorn, the dropout stereotype was important because of what it hid, not because of what it revealed. That is, by focusing on the dropout, educators and policy makers were able to shield themselves from direct confrontation with the inequities of schooling, the vagaries of the labor market, the paradoxes of credentialism, and the fear of dependency. This interpretation suggests that the particular construction of dropouts was intentional, rather than endemic. Educators, on this view, could have constructed matters otherwise. The "dropout" then hid from educators and the public an improved (liberal) prospect for education that might otherwise have been visible to them. In a broad sense, according to this interpretation, social construction is taken to be willful --the result of managed discourse, not of conflict over discourse.

The alternative reading, however, takes social construction to be the product of conflict whose sources arise outside of the discourse itself. On this view, social constructions embody material interests, and the conflicts over discursive representations of the social world implicate disputes over the way that material interests are translated into strategies of language. From this vantage, improvement has no absolute referent, and the truth of a claim depends on how it is contextualized, by whom, and toward what ends. This interpretation assumes that the position one takes on a question (for example, the question of dropouts) is not primarily voluntary, but constitutes an embodiment of one's material interests or alignments. Further, it posits that the truth of a claim is a matter internal to a position or constellation of interests, not susceptible to resolution across positions.

With respect to dropouts, the alternative reading presents two (or more) opposing sets of interests, reasoned in ways to establish internal coherence, but essentially incommensurable. One set of interests seeks to perpetuate social inequities, whether in the name of merit (e.g., recommending higher standards for degree attainment) or in the name of recuperation (e.g., calling for lower dropout rates). Providing more social goods to those who have historically been deprived constitutes another set of interests. And curiously, this set of interests may also be represented by the invocation to increase high school graduation rates of certain groups and to improve the quality of the high school curriculum.

Failing to give a thorough accounting of the conflicts implicit in the discourse on dropouts, Dorn ultimately provides a simplified and rootless interpretation. One of his concluding remarks demonstrates how this failing leads to a kind of incoherence.

The way we have rationalized our expectation of graduation, with the stereotype of

the high school dropout, has focused on the most superficial aspects of education--providing or maintaining the worth of credentials and preventing dependency and criminality. The social construction of the dropout problem has thus continued our national obsession with education either as a panacea for social problems or as the last bulwark against urban chaos. (p. 132)

What's wrong here is that Dorn imagines himself able to speak from some vantage external to social construction and, in a way, to discourse itself. If "we" are obsessed with a particular construction of education, how has Dorn managed to escape? If he hasn't escaped, how can he make the distinction between what is really "rational" and what is arbitrarily "rationalized?"

That this failing is subtle--some might say invisible or even manufactured--is testimony to Dorn's overall rigor and good will. He offers up a careful history in an effort to improve our outlook. The claim that his analysis of rhetoric might have opened onto a wider view of what discourse embeds and reveals is hardly a condemnation.

One last tangent took me back to the library for a brief and seemingly irrelevant, though surprisingly instructive, inquiry into the context of Dorn's title. I found him, and, for better or worse, he finds himself in the company of:

Creating the American Presidency, Creating the Best Impression, Creating the Big Game, Creating the Bill of Rights, Creating the Capacity for Attachment, Creating the Caring Congregation, Creating the Child, Creating the Child-centered Classroom, Creating the Cold War University, Creating the College of the Sea, Creating the Commonwealth, Creating the Competitive Edge through Human Resource Planning, Creating the Computer, Creating the Conditions for School Improvement, Creating the Constitution, Creating the Corporate Future, Creating the Country, Creating the Countryside, Creating the Couple, Creating the Empire of Reason, Creating the Entangling Alliance, Creating the Ergonomically Sound Workplace, Creating the European Community, Creating the Evangelizing Parish, Creating the Federal City, Creating the Federal Judicial System, Creating the Future, Creating the Future for South Dakota, Creating the Future of Health Care Education, Creating the Future Today, Creating the Future--Agendas for Tomorrow, Creating the Global Company, Creating the High Performance International Petrol, Creating the High Performance Team, Creating the Human Environment, Creating the Inclusive Preschool, Creating the Kingdom of Ends, Creating the Language of Thought, Creating the Library Identity, Creating the Literature Portfolio, Creating the Look, Creating the Medical Marketplace, Creating the Modern South, Creating the Multi-age Classroom, Creating the Nation in Provincial France, Creating the National Pastime, Creating the New American Hospital, Creating the New Local Government, Creating the New Wealth, Creating the Nonsexist Classroom, Creating the North American Landscape, Creating the Old Testament, Creating the Opportunity, Creating the Palestinian State, Creating the Peaceable School, Creating the People's University, Creating the Perfect Database, Creating the Perfect House Dog, Creating the Post-communist Order, Creating the Quality School, Creating the Resilient Organization, Creating the School, Creating the Second Cold War, Creating the Service Culture, Creating the Source through Folkloristic Fieldwork, Creating the Story, Creating the Successful Business Plan, Creating the Teachable Moment, Creating the Team, Creating the Technical Report, Creating the Technopolis, Creating the Thoughtful Classroom, Creating the Total Quality Effective School, Creating the Unipart Calendar, Creating the Virtual Store, Creating the Welfare State, Creating the West, Creating the Work you Love, Creating the World, Creating the Writing Portfolio, and

Creating the 21st Century Through Innovation.

Where exactly to locate Dorn's historical analysis among this crowd of persuaders, unpackers, and bandwagoners is your decision. But despite a certain theoretical inattentiveness, he still occupies, in my view, a piece of the high ground.

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Contributed Commentary on Volume 4 Number 15: Howley *A Review of Dorn's Creating the Dropout*

6 September 1996

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Aimee Howley's review of my book *Creating the Dropout* focuses on my social constructivist perspective on dropping out. She says, quite accurately, that I have not placed myself in the now burgeoning literature on deconstruction except by my own analysis. I plead no contest, with one caveat: Howley's claim that I am avoiding theoretical writing refers to deconstruction methodology, not my discussion of dropping out itself. Howley does not discuss that in as much detail, and I trust her recommendation to read the book implies I have done THAT job at least adequately.

The following, then, is a personal gloss on deconstruction and the social construction of dropping out.

Howley's most pointed criticism (at least to me) is noting that my description of the dropout literature of the 1960s as "irrational" implies the existence of some rational description. Again, I agree that that phrasing is a bit crude. I would be more accurate in saying that Daniel Schreiber and others promoting the idea of a "dropout problem" implied they were being rational and, by their own standards, were inconsistent in that claim.

Howley also asserts that I have tried to place myself outside the social construction of issues by implying some best construction of dropping out, especially in the final chapter where I suggest that viewing dropping out as an issue of inequities as an alternative. I make no explicit claim of being objective, nor do I think of myself as such. What I find as a legitimate use of deconstruction -- and of my book -- is in pointing out alternatives to the dominant social construction of an issue. The larger argument of the book, stated on page four, is that we have chosen the wrong way of viewing dropping out. Faced with two options, I prefer seeing education as a right of citizenship, not primarily as a tool of socialization. Stating my preference among historical options -- and staking a claim to the EXISTENCE of those options -- is not tantamount to claiming objectivity. It is claiming that we have the will to choose a particular social construction among feasible options.

Here, Howley and I part company on the value of deconstruction. If the social construction of issues is *not* at least partly voluntary (and what else would you call it when the Ford Foundation subsidizes a deliberate campaign to call attention to a "dropout problem"?), then what is the point of deconstruction? I know that Howley would not suggest that we wallow in the despair of being pawns in a giant chess game beyond our imagining. Yet, in the review, she implies that the social construction of issues is dominated by social and material conflicts beyond the agency of individuals involved in creating that social construction. I disagree. Philadelphia civil rights workers knew well their disagreements with a public school system that systematically discounted the aspirations and abilities of African-American children. The

Children's Defense Fund was deliberately criticizing how Southern schools had responded to desegregation when it labeled as "pushout" the thousands of African-American students suspended in newly-integrated schools. They were silenced, relatively speaking, but they were not ignorant, and neither should we be of their existence.

I also disagree with Howley's implication that we all need to label ourselves at some point when we deconstruct. Deconstruction as a methodology will succeed only when we no longer have to apologize, genuflect, and label our work "THIS IS DISCOURSE ON DISCOURSE" as we do so. Howley's own recognition of what I have done suggests that my more narrow discussion of the literature on social construction in the introduction, as well as the entire book, was sufficient for her to pigeonhole part of my methodology. If others are able to deconstruct me, and I can only disagree with them as far as I do with Howley, then I'll stand by my book as a legitimate use of deconstruction.