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BOOK REVIEW

With liberty and development for all

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Richard M. Lerner, Liberty: *Thriving and civic engagement among America's youth.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004. ISBN: 0-7619-2984-3 (pbk). 203 pp. $34.95.

Gloria Pipkin and ReLeah Cossett Lent, *At the schoolhouse gate: Lessons in intellectual freedom.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002. ISBN: 0-325-00395-5 (pbk). 235 pp. $22.

ReLeah Cossett Lent and Gloria Pipkin (Eds.), *Silent no more: Voices of courage in American schools.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003. ISBN: 0-325-00471-4 (pbk). 144 pp. $17.

Kevin W. Saunders, *Saving our children from the First Amendment.* New York: New York University, 2003. ISBN: 0-8147-9835-7 (cloth). 307 pp. $48.

Marjorie Heins, *Not in front of the children: "Indecency," censorship, and the innocence of youth.* New York: Hill and Wang, 2001. ISBN: 0-8090-7399-4 (pbk). 402 pp. $15.

Cecilia von Feilitzen and Ulla Carlsson, *Promote or protect? Perspectives on media literacy and media regulations: Yearbook 2003.* Goteborg, Sweden: The International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media: NORDICOM, Goteborg University, 2004. ISBN: 91-89471-23-7 (pbk). 260 pp. SEK 250, $25.

Amartya Sen, *Development as freedom.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999. ISBN: 0-385-72027-0 (pbk). 366 pp. $15.

The relation of liberty to development occupies the eight authors and editors of these seven books and additional authors of chapters within two of them. Their backgrounds and perspectives are diverse, ranging across psychology, education, law, history, and economics; encompassing dozens of European, Asian, African, and American cultures; and applying divergent conceptions of children and development. Most argue in various ways and for various reasons that liberty fosters development. Some add that development, in turn, fosters liberty, in a relation so close that freedom and development cannot be sharply distinguished.

Renowned developmentalist Richard Lerner tells us, in the preface to *Liberty*, that in the despair he experienced after September 11, 2001, he saw no hope for society or humanity, and thus no basis for continuing his professional work. "I felt my entire life had turned out to be meaningless. With no hope

of a future, there was also no rational reason for me to continue to seek to enhance the probability of positive development for the world's youth. With no future, there would be no development at all." (pp. xi–xii).

Fortunately for developing youth and for the field of developmental psychology, Lerner has found reasons and ways to continue his work. In this book he makes a passionate argument for social policies rooted in a vision of thriving youth developing in democratic societies. By respecting the freedom of those youth, society fosters their development, including their developing commitment to the society that respects their freedom. This is the social and developmental ideal that Lerner refers to as *liberty*:

> [T]hriving youth are on life journeys that involve productive civic engagement and valued contributions to other people and to the institutions of their communities. As well, thriving young people are individuals who live in a society that values and supports the freedom to take the initiative to make such individual contributions. I describe such a mutually beneficial relationship between person and society as *liberty* (p. 5).

The theoretical basis for Lerner's work is developmental systems theory. Developmental systems theory rejects both (a) biological determinist views in which development is the predictable working out of genetic programs and (b) cultural determinist views in which individuals are shaped or programmed by their social environments. Further, it rejects simple interactionist views in which genes and culture are construed as discrete but interacting forces. Rather, development is seen as a dynamic progression of organism/environment systems. Developing individuals, moreover, are deemed to be active agents who seek out and interpret experiences and thus play major roles in their own development.

This constructivist focus on active agents is particularly crucial to Lerner's argument and perhaps deserves more attention than it receives in *Liberty*. A democracy is not just an ongoing interaction of biological and cultural forces. Insect colonies are highly intricate and efficient biosocial systems, but they are not, and cannot be, democratic. Democracy requires autonomous citizens who act on the basis of beliefs, values, and interests of their own. Democracy, in other words, requires rational agents. Lerner's conception of liberty, then, requires a rational constructivist version of the developmental systems approach.

Turning to questions of policy, a major implication of the developmental systems approach is that adolescents, even when they make trouble, should not be seen as problems to be fixed:

> Any policy pertinent to young people must be predicated on…two [key principles]: (1) that strengths are present among *all* young people; and (2) that there exists the potential to enhance this strength through supporting their healthy development. In other words, policies must be developmental and positive in their orientation to young people. Accordingly, youth deficits and their prevention should be placed on the back burner of the policymaking agenda, and focus should be given to how we can, at each point in the young person's life, find age-appropriate ways to support his or her positive development by building on specific sets of strengths (pp. 145–146).

A developmental policy, moreover, will be rooted in respect for the developing individual's agency and autonomy. Liberty fosters development, which in turn fosters the system of liberty.

But there remains the stark reality of September 11 with which Lerner began. Whatever we might do to promote youth development, he despaired, would be in vain if the entire system of liberty were destroyed by its enemies. Intrinsic to this conceptualization of the problem is a guiding assumption

that liberty is uniquely, or at least especially, American. "The idea of America," Lerner asserts, "stands across history and throughout the contemporary world as the exemplar of liberty" (p. 15). With this in mind, he construes an attack on the United States as an attack on liberty and assumes without evidence that the attackers must be motivated by a hatred of freedom. We will return, after considering other visions of liberty, to this peculiar limitation in Lerner's analysis.

In *At the Schoolhouse Gate*, Gloria Pipkin and ReLeah Cossett Lent provide what they describe in their subtitle as *Lessons in Intellectual Freedom*. In two separate narratives, Pipkin and Lent, without ever using the term "developmental systems theory," tell how they created opportunities for students to thrive and develop—precisely the kinds of environments Lerner advocates. In the classes described here, students were free to choose what to read, what to write, and what to think. Among the less enthusiastic responses to this developmental approach were messages such as this:

> Woe to those who call evil good and good evil who put darkness for light and light for darkness who put bitter for sweet for they have revoked the law of the Lord for this you all shall die one by one (quoted on p. 60).

This message, put together with words cut from magazines and newspapers, was received by Gloria Pipkin, head of the Mowat Middle School English department in Lynn Haven, Florida, in Fall 1986. Pasted below, cut from a phone book, were her name and those of three other individuals. It was not the first death threat she received while fighting for her students' right to read, and the death threats are only a small piece of the extraordinary story told in the first part of this book. And no, this is not fiction.

Part two, a sequel to this tale of horror at school, takes place a decade later at nearby Mosley High School, where ReLeah Lent, who had been among the four listed to die, was now the highly popular and respected advisor to the award-winning student newspaper. Ordered by the principal to delete an advertisement for a gay support group from the next issue, she advocated respect for the student editors, who wanted to run the ad, but ultimately saw no choice but to comply. Incredibly, she was removed as newspaper advisor anyway. It was not enough, it turned out, to capitulate to the principal's power. You had to agree with him.

In both stories we see the devastating effects of censorship and politics on the professional and personal lives of teachers and on the education of their students. One cannot help notice, moreover, that most of the teachers in these stories are women, and that most of the people trying to keep them under control are men.

The absurdity of this assault on education is obvious to the students. Upon reading a parental suggestion that Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* was deficient in adult role models and that students should read more classics like *Huck Finn*, an eighth grade girl in Pipkin's English class responded, "First of all, we've already read *Huck Finn*, and if you want to talk about role models, we could start with Pap, who beats Huck and leaves him alone for months at a time. And then there's Miss Watson, who sells Jim away from his family" (quoted on p. 14).

But not everyone sees as clearly as these students, and the problem is not limited to Florida. "One small step at a time," the authors lament, "education eases backward as teachers are reduced to coloring within the lines that administrators, state legislators, and censors draw for them…[G]oing outside of those lines can be very costly indeed" (p. 215).

Unfortunately, these stories are all too typical. In their subsequent edited volume *Silent no more*, Lent and Pipkin present (again, their subtitle) *Voices of Courage in American Schools*. Here teachers tell their own engaging and disturbing stories of the risks they have taken to support student freedom and development, and the personal and professional prices they have paid. You keep expecting the First Amendment to show up and save the day, but it never does. It has been expelled from school, it turns out, by the U.S. Supreme Court.

The First Amendment provided substantial protection for intellectual freedom and student development for nearly two decades, from *Tinker v. Des Moines* (1969) to *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier* (1988). In *Tinker*, addressing the right of students to wear black armbands protesting the war in Vietnam, the Supreme Court upheld the First Amendment rights of the students. In an oft-quoted statement that inspired the title of Pipkin and Lent's first volume, the Court concluded, "It can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate" (p. 506).

In *Hazelwood*, however, the Court ruled that expression associated with the curriculum is under the control of administrators, subject only to the overriding authority of governing boards. Although the decision came in the context of a high school journalism dispute, the court's broad rationale placed curriculum-related expression in public schools firmly under government control, relegating the free expression of *Tinker* to the noncurricular domain of hall talk, lunchroom discussions, and underground newspapers. In a mirror image of standard conceptions of academic freedom, Hazelwood recognized the general protections of the First Amendment but set aside the curriculum as a special domain in which intellectual freedom must be limited in order to make education possible (Moshman, 1989).

Since 1988, students and teachers have regularly lost cases challenging administrative restrictions on teaching and learning. Two of the best-known victims of *Hazelwood*—Peggie Boring and Cissy Lacks—are among the teachers who tell their stories in *Silent no more*. American public schools, to a large and increasing extent, are systems of social control, not systems of liberty, and they often punish teachers who seek to promote development by respecting the freedom of their students.

Kevin Saunders, however, applauds *Hazelwood* and argues that it does not go far enough. In *Protecting our children from the First Amendment*, he advocates additional restrictions on the intellectual freedoms of children and adolescents. Although Saunders, Professor of Law at Michigan State University, is also the author of *Violence as obscenity: Limiting the media's First Amendment protection*, he is not simply on a crusade against the First Amendment. On the contrary, he acknowledges the justification for strong protection of at least some of the First Amendment rights of adults. He also believes that the First Amendment does tremendous harm, however, enough that we must weigh the harms against the benefits and seriously consider various compromises.

The compromise he advocates is to preserve a strong First Amendment for adults by restricting the First Amendment rights of children and adolescents. His justification for this is that the value of the First Amendment lies chiefly in its exercise by adults, whereas the harms of the First Amendment are suffered chiefly by children. Thus, limiting the First Amendment largely to adults maximizes the benefits and minimizes the harms.

Regarding the benefits, Saunders highlights two major roles and justifications for the free expression clauses of the First Amendment, though acknowledging others. First, and most important, the First Amendment enables the political discussion necessary for democratic decision making. This is fundamental because the First Amendment is part of a constitution setting up a system of democratic self-

government. Political freedom, including freedom of political discussion, is intrinsic to that system and central to its moral legitimacy.

A second role and justification for intellectual freedom is that, even beyond the political realm, it enhances the quality of discussion and thus promotes the truth. The promotion of truth is perhaps not a defining quality or moral obligation of democracy but it is surely important and a value to be protected. Thus, even if political discussion lies at the core of the First Amendment, there is good reason to extend the free market of ideas beyond the political realm.

Children do not vote, however, and their contributions to political discussion, or to progress in the arts and sciences, are far less than those of adults. Thus protection of children's First Amendment rights is of limited value to them and to society. At the same time, Saunders also argues, children are far more likely than adults to be harmed by exposure to sexual images, violent scenarios, and hateful ideas. Limiting the First Amendment rights of children protects them from harm while maintaining a strong First Amendment where it matters most—in the world of adults.

Both prongs of Saunders' analysis are psychologically dubious, however. First, far from being of value only for adults, the First Amendment is important to children and adolescents because intellectual freedom is critical to intellectual development (Moshman, 2003 and Moshman, 2005). Second, the alleged harms of exposure to sexuality, violence, and hate are far less direct, predictable, and specific to children than Saunders claims.

To see the value of the First Amendment for children, we must consider a third role and justification for it. Beyond democratic political discussion and the social pursuit of truth, the First Amendment affirms and promotes human dignity and personal development. The First Amendment is a right of each individual to intellectual autonomy, not just an enlightened instrument for the operation of governments, societies, and scholarly investigations.

This third role, which Saunders plays down, is particularly relevant to children. Restrictions on intellectual freedom may prevent people of any age from learning, forming, or expressing particular ideas. In the case of children, however, the effects of such restrictions may be more profound. Not only may censorship and indoctrination restrict cognitive activities but they may hinder developmental processes, which depend on challenge and contradiction.

As for Saunders' core concern with protecting children from harm, his evidence that children are harmed by intellectual freedom is unconvincing. Saunders provides sufficient evidence to disconfirm the null hypothesis that children are completely uninfluenced by images and ideas in their environments, but little evidence for direct causal effects on immediate behavior and no evidence for adverse effects on development. On the contrary, consistent with Lerner's developmental systems approach, research reveals the complex interrelations of social influences and their interactive and indirect effects on behavioral and developmental outcomes.

The definitive case against the special need for children to be saved from the First Amendment is made by writer and activist Marjorie Heins in *Not in front of the children: "Indecency," censorship, and the innocence of youth*. Heins provides a readable, and often hilarious, survey of the history of indecency and censorship in the United States and Great Britain and a comparative analysis that extends to other European countries and, to a lesser extent, across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In this broad context of wildly diverse views about sexuality, children, and censorship, the United States is tellingly evoked by a 1915 cartoon (following p. 178) depicting the notorious censor Anthony Comstock dragging a young woman before a judge for the dastardly crime of giving birth to a naked child.

Heins frames her historical tale of protecting children with a quote from Plato that, she notes, was favorably cited in the 1998 judicial ruling against Peggie Boring (whose account of her own case appears in *Silent no more*):

> A young person cannot judge what is allegorical and what is literal; anything that he receives into his mind at that age is likely to become indelible and unalterable; and therefore it is most important that the tales which the young first hear should be models of virtuous thoughts (p. 3).

In this historic formulation we see the empiricist assumptions that continue to motivate Saunders and other protectors of children. Heins rejects such assumptions as inconsistent with developmental theory and research showing that children and adolescents actively interpret what they experience, constructing and reconstructing their beliefs and conceptions. Contrary to Plato, Saunders, and the U.S. judiciary, children and adolescents are not helpless recipients of negative images and ideas. On the contrary, even children of elementary school age understand and appreciate intellectual diversity and liberty (Helwig, 2005, Helwig, in press and Wainryb et al., 2004), and adolescents are not categorically different from adults in this regard (Moshman, 2005).

Heins demonstrates the value of looking beyond the United States in studying and addressing issues of decency, censorship, and children, but the place to go for a truly international treatment of these issues is *Promote or protect? Perspectives on media literacy and media regulations*. Published as Yearbook 2003 of the International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media, the book is edited by Cecilia von Feilitzen (Scientific Coordinator of the Clearinghouse) and Ulla Carlsson (its Director). The contributing authors, mostly academics, write from Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Denmark, England, France, Ghana, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, and the United States. Despite expected differences in issues, assumptions, and options across cultures and countries, three universals emerge. Everywhere there is concern about the influence of rapidly proliferating media, everywhere there is concern to protect freedom of expression, and everywhere there is disagreement and discussion about how to reconcile these two considerations (see also Greenfield & Calvert, 2004).

Two themes pervade the volume. First, restrictions on media can take many forms, including direct governmental restrictions, media self-regulation within governmentally determined parameters, voluntary self-regulation by media, and guidance and control by schools, parents, and others. There are differences of opinion not only regarding how much regulation is necessary or justified but also regarding who should regulate children's access and the relative merits of various regulatory schemes.

Perhaps more important, there appears to be an emerging appreciation all over the world, though less in the U.S., of the importance of media literacy. At the very least, media literacy includes knowledge about the operation and influence of media, enabling a critical distance from its messages. More ambitiously, media literacy includes the ability to participate critically and creatively in the ongoing exchange of information and ideas. Even if regulatory efforts can provide genuine protections against genuine harms without undermining intellectual freedom, education aimed at enhancing media literacy is a useful complement to such regulation. Given that restrictions on media access are often unworkable, counterproductive, or inconsistent with intellectual freedom, moreover, the promotion of media literacy may provide an effective and defensible alternative. This conception of promotion as a means of protection is consistent with Lerner's critique of problem-focused approaches to youth and his advocacy of alternative approaches that promote development.

Finally, there is *Development as freedom*, in which Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen provides, at least with respect to the development of nations, the definitive analysis of the relation of liberty to development. Development, Sen argues, profits from conditions of liberty and respect for human agency. Freedoms of speech, press, and assembly, along with other civil liberties and opportunities, promote the economic development of nations. There are those who think such freedoms must be sacrificed to make development possible, but Sen provides evidence that liberty, far from being a luxury for economically advanced countries, is critical to economic progress.

Freedom, however, is not just the means of development but equally its end. Development, for Sen, is not just a matter of increasing wealth. Wealth is valuable for the freedoms it permits. We can choose whether or not to have or do whatever we can afford; the less we can afford, the fewer choices we have. Through development, we enhance our capabilities and options. Development, then, is progress in freedom.

Although Sen's focus is the economic development of nations, his conclusions are fully consistent with constructivist developmental systems conceptions of child development. Development is something a child or nation does, not something done to it by adults or other nations. With this in mind, we should be wary of loose talk about children, or nations, as resources to be developed. Adults cannot develop children, nor can nations develop other nations. Development, at all levels, is a self-regulated process. We can promote the development of others, but only by enhancing their agency, not by restricting it (Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio, & Turner, 2004). Restrictions on agency, in fact, predictably engender resistance because consciousness of agency and commitment to freedom are universal.

Thus we must respect freedom in order to promote development, which, it turns out, is the promotion of freedom. For individuals and for nations, freedom is both the means and the end of development.

This developmental perspective is fully consistent with that of Lerner. Sen's universalism, however, stands in sharp contrast with Lerner's conception of liberty as fundamentally American. The commitment to freedom, in Sen's view, is deeply rooted in human agency (see also Sen, 2002) and thus universal. Evidence from Sen, Heins, and the editors and authors of *Promote or protect* abundantly illustrates the universality of the commitment to liberty (see also Helwig, 2005 and Helwig, in press). However diverse our beliefs and values, we all want the freedom to act on the basis of our own beliefs and values, not those we attribute to other people, cultures, and nations.

Are attacks on America attacks on liberty? Lerner provides no evidence to support the implausible hypothesis that those who attack us hate us for our freedom. A more likely alternative is that they attack, even at the sacrifice of their own lives, because they value their own freedom as much as we value ours.

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