

**Education for Empire: American Schools, Race, and the Paths of Good Citizenship by Clif Stratton, Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016. P. 288. Paperback \$28.47. ISBN: 978-0520285675**

By Manuela A. Gomez

I am the first Mexican American in the history of a prestigious Texas university established in 1876 to ever receive a graduate degree in philosophy. By the sounds of this, one might think that this was many decades ago, but it was in fact relatively recently, in 2006. This means that in 130 years, no one like me had such educational opportunity. I still remember some of the comments from my classmates: “your parents must be really rich for you to be here” or “there must be some minority quota the school has to fill.” The reality was that my father had to work 10 times harder to convert the money he earned in Mexican pesos into dollars and I maintained a perfect 4.0 GPA to preserve the multiple scholarships I received. Eventually, my grades and the quality of my work would prove to them that I was there because of family sacrifice and academic merit. Today, I continue to prove myself.

As a philosophy educator and as a woman of color in the United States, the racist history of education in this country is no surprise to me. This is because I have encountered it face to face in my lived experience as a student and as a teacher in multiple occasions. In my scholarly formation, I have read considerable literature that documents the countless instances of abuse and discrimination that minorities have endured in and around the classroom for centuries. However, *Education for Empire: American Schools, Race, and the Paths of Good Citizenship* (Stratton, 2016) is much more than a history book about American education. It is a critical work that provides philosophical undertones that challenge our perception about the imperial roles of the U.S. school system. Stratton very clearly and meticulously presents the intricate relationship between history, civics, and geography within school curricula and textbooks. He shows us how these subjects have been manipulated by those in power to promote a hidden agenda. One that instills national pride, American loyalty, and patriotism, and is designed to turn students into supporters of U.S. imperialism and of their racial and class hierarchies. An example of this is Stratton’s own examination of the content of books like, *Complete Geography* written in 1899. Stratton claims this text was widely used in American public schools and it explicitly states that, “the Caucasian or white race is most intelligent and most powerful of all races.”

*Education for Empire: American Schools, Race, and the Paths of Good Citizenship* helps us understand why it has taken so much time for people of color, like me, to occupy academic spaces and to begin the dismantling of oppressive governmental and pedagogical systems that have intentionally kept us from having a dignified education. Stratton argues that the history of American schooling has created unequal paths to “good citizenship” and “has been as much about excluding or

subordinating certain kinds of people as it has been about including, regenerating, and reshaping others” (p.3). In this case, despite legal citizenship, the others, the excluded, the unpatriotic, are all the nonwhites.

A remarkable aspect of this book is that Stratton does not focus on just one specific period of time. He begins his analysis in the late 1800s and ends all the way until 2010. Furthermore, he does not only focus on a particular location of the U.S., but he also provides a latitudinal exploration of the history of imperialism that ranges from California to New York. His understanding of U.S. empire includes the conquest of Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and the Philippines.

Precisely because this work is so complete, the amount of appalling historical information can at times be overwhelming. A visual timeline might be helpful to follow the course of developments and to gain a more concise understanding of the context and the dates discussed for the non-academic reader. Moreover, the chapter organization of this book is a chronological journey of systematic racist obstacles that lay the foundation for a powerful argument for resistance. A unique feature of this book is that it is a collection of uncomfortable historical facts that must be confronted. It forces the reader to engage in an implicit call for action.

The cover of the paperback edition immediately tells a powerful story of inequality. It is one in which students of color have been caricatured, looked down on by the United States’ government, and segregated for supposed inferiorities. The students of color are illustrated with dark skin, barefoot, and disoriented. Other visuals are found throughout the book, like maps that were employed to frame a historical narrative of the moral and intellectual subordination of people of color. These maps were also used to justify geographic determinism and to create metageographies that excuse racism. One example of geographic determinism that stands out is how climate was used to claim that because Mexico and Central America are warm, people are lazy. The effects of this nonsense are still very present today in unjustified stereotypes that perpetuate disrespect for entire groups of hard-working Latin American people. The book also includes archival photographs and posters that portray the disgusting, but undeniable reality of white racism. One of these photographs is from California in 1925, it depicts a group of Mexican American students in segregated schooling. The young children are all posing in front of a barn instead of a classroom as they are about to receive manual training since they were perceived to have few abilities beyond agricultural labor.

The abuse was not just domestic. Stratton analyzes the effects of the Monroe Doctrine, presenting the paternalistic and colonizing role of the United States in controlling, overseeing, and imposing authority over other nations. Stratton’s main contribution is the unique revelation of how imperialism played out in the sphere of American education.

Throughout *Education for Empire*, one can’t help but to be infuriated by the hateful acts targeted against Asians, Blacks, Native Americans, Hawaiians, and Latinos,

to name just a few of the groups, that were demeaned and condemned by the American government. An example of this condemnation is the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. This legislature made race an explicit reason for subordination, especially in California. Stratton argues that Chinese children born in the U.S. were perceived as lacking racial fortitude and moral capacity to be “good citizens”. He claims that while Chinese parents were able to secure a public education for their children, they were often segregated and humiliated. This type of exclusion also affected the Japanese who were treated as inferior because white exclusionists feared an “oriental invasion”.

Besides the discrimination against Asian populations, Stratton successfully exposes many of the crafted and carefully curated narratives of race hierarchy presented by American school administrators along with exclusionary school policies that demeaned multiple groups of students of color. He skillfully weaves the disturbing historical cases into every one of the six chapters of the book. These range from introducing the concept of a “good citizen” to exploring the connection between knowledge and citizenship. Stratton helps us realize that discrimination and hate have been towards all groups that do not fit the standard of a white, patriotic citizen.

Stratton inevitably forces his readers to ask themselves what does it mean to be patriotic? He claims that civic curricula emerged in the 1890s as a way to enforce patriotism. Additionally, he reminds us that American education has always served the purpose of alerting us and preventing us from engaging with “evils” that attempt to go against our expected patriotism. He argues that “by educating schoolchildren about the perceived evils of socialism, labor unions, and anarchism, the nation’s leaders could rest assured that the next generation of workers, teachers, professionals, and policy makers would in turn protect democracy and capitalism” (p. 47). Therefore, soldiers willing to defend these principles with their lives were considered a perfect example of the ideal patriots and “good citizens”. For the most part, these heroic figures were white or Caucasian. According to Stratton, these terms were used interchangeably to symbolize Americanism.

Even though whiteness was often identified with civilization in American history, Stratton shows us that becoming a “good citizen” was more complex and not just about being a white patriotic individual. Whites were perceived to have affinities for civilization and learning, and the races that were immigrating were identified as having weaker dispositions for civilization. Even if they were already white, some were treated as problematic, like the Italians, Russians, and Jews. These groups were seen as requiring more training. This is because belonging to the U.S. state required becoming whiter or more Americanized. Americanization involved an adherence to U.S. nationalism and imperialism and often had a component of morality, in which being, and acting American was associated to being good. In other words, being American also meant being a good person in the ethical sense, not just in the sense of fulfilling one’s civic duty. Stratton places a heavy emphasis on demonstrating, with a series of case studies, how the concept of good was modified to benefit white power, particularly in the context of education. He exposes the numerous types of mental and physical exploitation that

students of color endured. In Hawaii, in an era of dispossession and annexation, it appeared disguised as manual industrial training, in which native Hawaiian students were forced to work in the fields as part of their “schooling”. It was common for Hawaiian children caught in petty crimes to be sent to school as punishment and for students who tried to run away to be shackled. The industrial schools commonly contracted child labor to private companies.

Stratton explains that industrial education also exploited Black students in Georgia, where there was a renewed polarization of race and class that worked within the bounds of post-civil war law. While education was long regarded as a matter of the private initiative of the rich in the South, prominent school reformers believed that investing in Black schooling would allow for Atlanta’s white economic prosperity. However, Black communities lacked adequate facilities because public schools and funding were controlled by the whites. The education for Black Atlantans, many of them ex-slaves, was deeply inferior than that of whites. The ongoing demeaning rhetoric that described Blacks as “savages” denied them a quality education, as well.

Stratton highlights philosophical figures that spoke up against racial abuse. One of them was W.E.B. Du Bois, who was one of the first civil rights activists to claim that there was a connection between racial ideology and citizenship. Du Bois critically analyzed the concept of labor and saw the education of Black students as reflecting the contours of U.S. citizenship. He was an adamant critic of segregation and the oppression of Blacks. Several other important figures are mentioned, like Booker T. Washington, as an example of a successful student at the Hampton Normal School. John Dewey is also mentioned for critiquing Americanism and for targeting New York city schools for reform, mainly because that is where most immigrants arrived to. Dewey is presented as a pioneer in advocating for a doctrine of pluralism, for opposing cultural conformity, and for challenging exclusionists.

Stratton demonstrates how language instruction also played a role in excluding and favoring individuals in the school system, and an example of this is how English became the only permissible language for education. This affected many ethnicities and gave way to designating English language deficiencies, especially among Mexican American students, who were segregated for alleged low IQs and whose poverty and Spanish-speaking was also interpreted as a sign of mental inferiority. This connects to the revelations found in the epilogue, where Stratton affirms that neo-restrictionists continue to question who is a “good citizen”. The book ends with the contemporary case of Arizona laws that have aimed to ban ethnic studies programs. Stratton claims this is an example of the lingering effects of the racialization of Mexican Americans.

This inescapably relates to the documentary *Precious Knowledge* (2012) which exposes the struggles of La Raza ethnic study program in Tucson, Arizona. This unique film showcases the importance of preserving the histories and identities of Mexican American and Chicano students within the classroom. This documentary confirms Stratton’s assertions, that the American school system is discriminatory against students

of colors by treating them as outsiders and as unpatriotic. La Raza program emphasized teaching the importance of critical thinking and exposing students to their own history so they could feel empowered. During the period La Raza program was active, students' grades started improving and many of them aspired to go to college. On the other hand, for many white conservatives, the rhetoric of this program was unsurprisingly considered anti-American and a form of hate speech. The students and teachers involved were considered traitors to the U.S. The opponents of this program argued that it promoted the overthrow of the government and the constitution. Ironically, it was perceived as a racist program that was designed to exclude those that were not Mexican American. Following Stratton's claims, this is a continuation of the intertwining of education and empire. We see that this is another form of exclusion and categorization of "good" and "bad" citizens. Skin color remains a common factor in this determination.

I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to interview Stratton and directly ask him what the message for educators of color is after reading *Education for Empire* and after being exposed to the overwhelming racist history of education in the U.S. He replied that the fact that I, a Mexican American woman, who is an assistant professor in higher education, was asking him that question was a sign that many things have changed, but that we still have a long way to go. I think he is right. However, numbers show that academic philosophy is still one of the most underrepresented fields for women and people of color, not just in the U.S. but worldwide. To this day, Latin American philosophy is still considered an area of focus that metaphorically belongs in the barn outside, like the Mexican American children posing in the picture without access to the main building of mainstream philosophy.

While Stratton maintains objectivity throughout his writing in exposing educational inequalities, it would perhaps be helpful to read a paragraph dedicated to his epistemic positionality, as a white male author, who is an educator, and his intention for the purpose of this book. Stratton's readers, especially educators of color, would benefit from this explanation, possibly as a brief paragraph in the acknowledgements. Stratton does a magnificent job of correlating racism to empire building in education, but he briefly exposes the multiple layers of inequality beyond race. Very fleetingly, he claims that women were treated as marginal, but he does not fully address gender discrimination as separate from race. He does not explore how women were victimized by U.S. schooling for their gender or if they were doubly mistreated for being women of color. It would be interesting for him to have also exposed how sexuality was also a tool for exclusion and empire building.

Furthermore, I would have liked to read an explicit paragraph that overtly called out the history of strategic racism by stating that none of this imperial building was accidental. It has always been intentionally crafted. Even though it is implied, there is power in calling it out. The history of American education has been and continues to be racist. This book becomes more relevant when we look at the current overtly racist

political dialogues that may shock many, but they are not new. We have a long history of discrimination and of educating for the empire.

I wish I could keep speaking and writing about this in the past tense, but the reality is that much of what is presented in this book is still very present today and manifested in similar ways. President Trump has recently called for a commission to promote patriotic education in American schools. If you read, *Education for Empire: American Schools, Race, and the Paths of Good Citizenship*, you will be disturbed by what this truly means. But there is a dim light at the end of this dark tunnel. Some of the same schools that were the sites for empire building are now the birthplaces for critical challenges to the American empire. An example of this is the El Paso Community College, the leading institution in the nation to serve Hispanic students, 85% of them identify as Mexican American and many of them study philosophy and focus on ways in which to dismantle systemic racism and gender oppression. It is, ironically, the access to education that allows students to realize that there was never any conquering in American history, there was abuse and there were, and continue to be, victims of imperial building and white power.

Without a doubt, this book is essential to the social sciences and is helpful for students and teachers in history, sociology, education, but also in philosophy. Stratton effectively and actively engages readers. After reading this book, one cannot remain passive after being exposed to so much injustice. As a Mexican American woman and educator, I will fit this book into my philosophy curriculum. There is room for plenty of discussion surrounding the sociopolitical and epistemological implications of American empire. I'm mostly excited to use this book in the context of ethics, where I now have the opportunity to subvert and reframe the concept of a "good citizen".

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