The Savage Origins of Child-Centered Pedagogy, 1871–1913

Thomas Fallace
William Paterson University of New Jersey

Child-centered pedagogy is at the ideological core of progressive education. The simple idea that the child rather than the teacher or textbook should be the major focus of the classroom is, perhaps, the single most enduring educational idea of the era. In this historical study, the author argues that child-centered education emerged directly from the theory of recapitulation, the idea that the development of the White child retraced the history of the human race. The theory of recapitulation was pervasive in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and psychology at the turn of the 20th century, and so early progressive educators uncritically adopted the basic tenets of the theory, which served as a major rationale for child-centered instruction. The theory was inherently ethnocentric and racist because it pointed to the West as the developmental endpoint of history, thereby depicting people of color as ontologically less developed than their White counterparts.

KEYWORDS: progressive education, race, recapitulation, stage theory

The essence, extent, and definition of progressive education (1890–1958) has been one of the most historiographically disputed topics of the past half century (see Church and Sedlak, 1976; Cremin, 1961; Egan, 2002; Graham, 1967; Kliebard, 1995; Labaree, 2005; Mirel, 2003; Ravitch, 2000; Reese, 2001; Semel and Sandovnik, 1988; Spring, 1970; Tanner & Tanner, 1990; Tyack, 1974; Wraga, 2001; Zilversmit, 1993). Despite disagreement over the origins, nature, and impact of progressive education in American schools, general consensus exists that the idea of child-centeredness was in some way at the ideological core of the movement. For example, Zilversmit (1993) identified the desire “to create schools in which children would find a nurturing environment that would allow them to develop their individual capacities” (p. 3) as the single most defining feature of progressive education.
education. Labaree (2005) identified “naturalistic pedagogy (which arises from the needs, interests, and capacities of the child and responds to the will of the child)” as one of the movement’s major objectives. Ravitch (2000) named “the idea that the methods and ends of education could be derived from the innate needs and nature of the child” (p. 60) as one of four major aspects of progressive education. Furthermore, Kliebard (1995) identified “the assumption that the natural order of development in the child was the most significant and scientifically defensible basis for determining what should be taught” (p. 11) as one of four major ideological currents of period. Although progressive education cannot be reduced solely to child-centeredness, the idea is indisputably at the philosophical core of the movement, especially in its early years. The simple idea that the child rather than the teacher or textbook should be the major focus of the classroom is perhaps the single most enduring educational idea of the era.

Child-centered pedagogy emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries from the innovative ideas and techniques of European philosophers Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Froebel, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, and Johann Herbart. Drawing on their ideas, Maria Montessori, Colonel Francis W. Parker, and John Dewey further developed practical applications of child-centered pedagogy in their innovative schools in Italy and the United States. Thus, by the turn of the 20th century, child-centered pedagogy emerged as a powerful international idea espoused by some of the world’s leading educators. In this historical study I argue that child-centered education emerged directly from the theory of recapitulation, the idea that the development of the child retraced the history of the human race. To put it other ways, it is the theory that the stages of psychological development of the individual correspond with the stages of sociological development of modern societies or that individuals pass through the same linear stages through which modern societies pass. This theory was inherently ethnocentric and racist because it pointed to White society as the developmental endpoint of human history, thereby depicting people of color as ontologically less developed than their White counterparts (Chakrabarty, 2000; Mills, 1997), a belief that helped launch and sustain a century of deficit thinking toward students of color in American schools (Valencia, 1997).

**Literature Review**

Historians have already reported on the pervasiveness of recapitulation theory in the history of the disciplines of biology (Barkan, 1992; Gould, 1977, 1981), anthropology (Baker, 1998; Stocking, 1968, 1987), sociology (Cravens, 1978; McKee, 1993), psychology (Cravens and Burnham, 1971; Jacobson, 1998, 2000; Richards, 1987), and literature (Gossett, 1963). However, histories of the origins of progressive education have failed to identify the centrality of recapitulation theories to the thinking of child-
centered reformers. Studies that have identified recapitulation in early progressive education have either failed to explore fully its pervasiveness and ethnocentric/racist repercussions (Egan, 2002; Strickland, 1967), or they have been limited to studies of eugenics in education (Selden, 1999; Winfield, 2007), the education of African Americans (Anderson, 1988; Watkins, 2001), Native Americans (Adams, 1995; Jacobs, 2009), and foreign students under U.S. control (Coloma, 2009; Paulet, 2007) without tracing the impact of the theory on the broader curriculum for White students. Although some historians have addressed aspects of the impact of recapitulation theory on educational thinkers, this attention has largely been limited exclusively to so-called child study advocates such as G. Stanley Hall and the American followers of Johann Herbart (Cleverley & Phillips, 1986; Cremin, 1961; Curti, 1963; Garrison, 2008; Goodchild, 2012; Kliebard, 1995; Ross, 1972); Thomas Jesse Jones, architect of the social studies curriculum at the Hampton Institute (Kliebard, 2002; Watkins, 2001); and more recently—and controversially—the work of John Dewey (Fallace, 2010, 2011; Marginis, 2009; Sullivan, 2003). This study builds on this scholarship by demonstrating that the influence of the theory of recapitulation extended well beyond Dewey, Jones, Hall, and the Herbartians to key child-centered pedagogues such as Colonel Francis W. Parker, Lester Frank Ward, William Torrey Harris, Charles Judd, William Bagley, Charles Eliot, and many others.

**Methodology**

I am approaching the origins of child-centered pedagogy through the lens of intellectual history. As historian Arthur Lovejoy (1964) explains, the history of ideas assumes that there are implicit assumptions, or more or less unconscious mental habits, operating in the thought of an individual or a generation. It is the beliefs which are so matter of course that they are rather tacitly presupposed than formally expressed and argued for, the ways of thinking which seem so natural and inevitable that they are not scrutinized with the eye of logical self-consciousness. (p. 7)

As leading British child study advocate James Sully wrote in 1902: “As we all know, the lowest races of mankind stand in close proximity to the animal world. The same is true for infants of the civilized races” (p. 26). Not only did Sully explicitly and succinctly state his belief in the theory of recapitulation and its relationship to racial theory and child development, but more significantly, he presented it as something “we all know.” The theory of recapitulation was not something that needed to be explained thoroughly or supported with extensive evidence because it was a “tacitly presupposed” belief shared by the entire intellectual community.
My narrative presents dozens of examples of how well-known and less known social scientists and educators drew on the theory of recapitulation in their suggested programs for how to prepare children for their role in the modernizing world. I demonstrate that almost all of the significant proponents of reforming the American curriculum believed that the development of the individual retraced the history of the human race through the stages of savagery, barbarianism, and civilization and that non-White social groups represented an earlier, inferior status—an idea that was dismissive and demeaning to students and adults of color.

Racial language during this period was constantly shifting. As such, I paid close attention to my own terminology as well as the evolving terminology of time. The term culture was problematic because its meaning changed rapidly between 1871 and 1913. To some, “premodern” non-White social groups had no culture, and so the term was never applied to groups believed to be in the “barbarian” and/or “savage” stage of development. To others, non-White social groups had an earlier, embryonic, less developed culture. Not until the mid-1910s did some social scientists such as Franz Boas begin to use the term culture in the contingent, relativistic sense it is now understood (see Stocking, 1968), as the “ever changing values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created, shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by a combination of factors that can include a common history, geographic location, language, social class, and religion” (Nieto, 2010, p. 78). In an attempt to navigate these shifting meanings, I avoided using the term culture and cultures unless they appeared in quotations of the historical actors. Instead, I use the term social group to refer to an ethnic group with a shared history and identity and sociological stage to refer to the perceived steps toward the allegedly highest lifestyle of White, educated, intellectual elites. In addition I use the term sociologically deficient to depict the contemporaneous belief that non-White social groups and their descendants represented an earlier, ontologically less developed form of living.

Furthermore, in my discussion of racial theory I avoid applying the term pseudo-science to describe many of the racial theories employed between 1871 and 1913, even though by current standards these theories were based on inconsistent, weak, and erroneous empirical grounds. From the vantage point of the present, the theory of recapitulation was overtly racist, self-serving, and even a little bit ridiculous. Looking back, it is easy to see how leading White scholars and policymakers used science as a tool to exploit and oppress vulnerable groups. Yet, at the time, scholars took these theories seriously as science, and even those who challenged and opposed racial hierarchies, such as Boas, did so in the spirit of scholarly collegiality and scientific objectivity (see Boas, 1916). In other words, the architects of progressive education saw no distinction between pseudo-science and science, and so in order to better capture their intellectual world, my narrative
also makes no distinction. “The responsibility of the historian or sociologist who studies racism is not to moralize and condemn,” historian George Frederickson (2003) explains, “but to understand this malignancy so that it can be more effectively treated, just as a medical researcher studying cancer does not moralize about it but searches for knowledge that might point the way to a cure” (p. 158).

This study is an intellectual history of the pervasive uses of the theory of recapitulation in education and its intimate relationship with the emergence of child-centered pedagogy in the United States. As such, it will focus on published works by major and minor figures in psychology, the social sciences, and education as well as published textbooks and curriculum materials. My focus is on the pervasive impact of the theory of recapitulation itself and how early progressive educators tacitly and explicitly employed the theory in their discussions of race, reform, and pedagogy. Consequently, I do not provide lengthy biographies of figures who employed the theory of recapitulation, nor do I explore the pedagogical outlooks of these figures beyond their relationship to the theory. My focus is on the shared tacit beliefs of an entire generation of scholars. I argue that the idea of child-centered pedagogy was coterminous with the ethnocentric and racist anthropological linear stage theory that equated children with non-White savages. Scholars employed the theory of recapitulation simultaneously as a theory of racial hierarchy and a theory about how children learn. Consequently, the very idea of child-centeredness that played such a central role in the progressive education movement can itself be traced in part to the theory of recapitulation. As one anthropologist reported in 1900:

The view that the individual more or less distinctly repeats at least the chief stages in the development of the race, both mentally and physically, has been accepted as the cardinal doctrine of the newer theories of education which in the form of “child study” have made their influence felt in American and the old world. (Chamberlain, 1900, p. 52)

Recapitulation Theory at the End of the 19th Century

The idea that non-White individuals and societies were less developed than their White counterparts began with the philosophical theory of the Great Chain of Being as first espoused by Plato and Aristotle. As a result of this philosophical foundation, throughout Western history most educated persons held a conception of the universe as, according to intellectual historian Arthur Lovejoy (1936), “an infinitive number of links ranging in hierarchical order from the meagerest kind of existents, which barely escape non-existence, through every possible grade . . . , to the highest possible creature” (p. 59). The Great Chain of Being took on its racialized character during the age of exploration and age of imperialism during which
Europeans came into contact with non-Christian, premodern hunter-gatherer societies (Goldberg, 1993; Hobsbawn, 1987; Mills, 1997). The term savage—which scholars consistently employed to describe non-White hunter-gatherers—not only connoted non-White but also non-Christian. The publication of Charles Darwin’s (1871) *Descent of Man*, as well as pre-existing evolutionary theories of social development, gave further credence to concepts of racial competition and struggle, with savages and barbarians at the bottom of the developmental scale. “At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries,” Darwin predicted in the *Descent of Man*, “the civilized races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace throughout the world the savage races” (p. 193). Darwin viewed such competition among societies and the displacement of lower races as inevitable. Darwin’s and other evolutionary theories consistently depicted White societies as evolutionary winners and non-White societies as evolutionary losers in the race for survival and dominance, and non-White races were depicted as savage antecedents to civilized Western races. As Darwin affirmed, the “Western nations of Europe, who now so immeasurably surpass their savage progenitors, . . . stand at the summit of civilization” (p. 171).

In 1877, proto-anthropologist Lewis H. Morgan, in his book *Ancient Society*, codified the principle stages of human development more formally as lower savagery, middle savagery, upper savagery, lower barbarism, middle barbarism, upper barbarism, and civilization with accompanying descriptions. Morgan’s hierarchical language was adopted by virtually every social scientist of the period when depicting racial and ethnic groups. In this classic book, Morgan (1877) noted: “The history and experience of the American Indian tribes represent, more or less, nearly, the history and experience of our own remote ancestors”—an ontological and methodological assumption he shared with his peers (p. xxxi). In addition, German biologist Ernst Haeckel proposed the biogenetic theory that *ontogeny recapitulated phylogeny*—that is, that the development of the individual recapitulated the history of the biological development of the human race (as cited in Gould, 1977). Haeckel’s recapitulation theory provided further support to the notion that individuals progressed through stages similar to societies, although this general idea had been around for centuries. His theory also reiterated the view that non-White societies and individuals were ontologically less developed than their White counterparts because they represented an earlier psychological-sociological stage (as cited in Gould, 1977).

By the end of the 19th century, there was a biological and anthropological framework to envision the world through a single, linear scale of human development. The findings of the newly professionalized social sciences supported four basic “tacitly presupposed” understandings that reflected the Great Chain of Being and the theory of recapitulation: first, that all the societies of the world could be placed along a single, linear path leading through the sociological stages of savagery, barbarianism, and civilization;
second, that all the individuals of the world could be placed along a single, linear path leading through specific psychological stages; third, that these psychological stages more or less recapitulated these sociological stages; and fourth, that most people of color and their descendants were stuck in an earlier sociological-psychological stage of development (Gossett, 1963; Jacobson, 2000; McKee, 1993; Stocking, 1968, 1987). Thus, most social scientists considered savages as the biological and psychological equivalent of children and vice versa. Although significant differences existed among scholars about the mechanisms of racial differentiation and evolution, virtually all social scientists subscribed to these four basic beliefs. In the following, I not only demonstrate how the leading social scientists of the pre-progressive generation in the field of anthropology, sociology, and psychology held the basic assumptions of the Great Chain of Being and the theory of recapitulation, but more significantly, I demonstrate how these basic assumptions were adopted uncritically by the generation of educators who launched child-centered pedagogy in U.S. schools.

Recapitulation Theory in Anthropology and Sociology

Anthropologists in Britain and the United States in the 19th century were primarily concerned with studying the prehistoric evolution of humankind. As a group, anthropologists unequivocally supported the Great Chain of Being and the theory of recapitulation. They drew on several sources. First, they read and interpreted the firsthand accounts of non-White hunter-gatherer societies in Africa and Americas, authored by explorers and adventurers. Second, they often visited these non-White hunter-gatherer societies themselves and wrote firsthand accounts. Third, they measured the skull and brains sizes of different racial groups and studied the fossil remains of prehistoric humans. Fourth, they traced the development and spread of languages. Based on these ethnographic, archeological, and linguistic studies, anthropologists constructed racial classification systems and evolutionary flow charts that reinforced the linear savagery-barbarianism-civilization hierarchy of sociological development.

The main author of the modern idea of cultural development was British anthropologist E. B. Tylor, whose 1871 book *Primitive Culture* became a classic in the field. His study consisted of comparisons and contrasts between the behaviors of what he called savage and civilized groups. “The comparisons between the savage and civilized religions,” Tylor (1871) explained, “brings into view . . . a deep-lying contrast in their practical action on human life” (p. 360). As Tylor (1881) explained further, “civilization in the world has grown up through . . . stages, so as to look at a savage in a Brazilian forest . . . may be the students’ best guide to understanding the progress of civilization” (pp. 24–25). Here Tylor asserted not only that all races could be placed on a single, universal scale of development but also
that early White ancestors were the cultural equivalent of non-White socie-
ties in the present. Tylor (1871) specifically named “American savages” and
“African barbarians” (p. 101) as the kind of premodern social groups he was
addressing, a lifestyle that he declared was uniformly present in the “lower
races from Kamchatka to Tierra del Fuego, and from Dahome to Hawaii”
(p. 6). Likewise, Morgan (1877) insisted that his sequence of stages was “his-
torically true of the entire human family, up to the status attained by each
branch respectively” (pp. 3–4). In addition, Morgan confirmed the accepted
belief of the time that only White social groups had progressed beyond the
stage of barbarism.

Proponents of the new psychology, new sociology, and new education
approached their subject through an evolutionary lens. As such, they often
cited and drew on the latest research of anthropologists, who confirmed
the theory of recapitulation in their work. For example, throughout
Primitive Culture, Tylor (1871) compared “the state of things among chil-
dren and savages,” asserting that the two were psychological equivalents
(p. 265). Similarly, anthropologist Alfred C. Haddon (1898) argued that the
child “repeats in its growth” the development of the savage “from which civ-
ilized man had so recently emerged” (p. xxii). Evidence for this correspon-
dence, Haddon reasoned, could be seen “in the singing games of children
[which is] a persistence of savage and barbaric practice” (p. xxii). The beliefs
that non-White societies represented a previous step toward the civilized
West and that non-White adults were the psychological equivalent of chil-
dren represented first principles assumed to be true by virtually every
anthropologist at the turn of the century.

The theory of recapitulation served as a first principle for the field of
sociology as well. The two leading sociological theorists of the late 19th cen-
tury were Herbert Spencer and Lester Frank Ward. Curriculum historians
tracing the origins of progressive education almost always contextualize
their discussion in the divergent beliefs of these two leading thinkers
(Kliebard, 1995; Krug, 1964; Tanner & Tanner, 1990). Spencer was a leading
social Darwinian who espoused a laissez faire approach to economics and
public policy. Ward, on the other hand, was a proponent of government
intervention and social welfare. Ward was one of the first advocates of using
education as a means of social, economic, and cultural uplift (Kliebard, 1995;
Tanner & Tanner, 1990). Yet despite these major differences, the sociological
theories of both Spencer and Ward relied on the recapitulation theory
because both made commonsense references to the universal sociological
stages of savagery, barbarianism, and civilization, and both specifically refer-
enced non-White social groups as occupying the precivilized stage. For
example, in First Principles, Spencer (1864) argued that all societies moved
along an identical linear process of growth from a state of homogeneity to
greater and greater heterogeneity. “The change from homogeneity to hetro-
geneity is displayed equally in the progress of civilization as a whole and in
the progress of each tribe or nation,” Spencer (1864) explained, “and is still going on with greater rapidity” (p. 158). This universal law could be proved, Spencer insisted, by studying “existing barbarous tribes” because these tribes allegedly represented a period of transition from a lower to a higher sociological stage (p. 158). So according to Spencer, premodern societies represented earlier steps toward more developed civilizations and could be studied to gain insight into earlier forms of Western society. In addition, Spencer suggested that this continuum of social development could serve as a guide for curriculum. As Spencer (1861) explained, “The education of the child must accord both in mode and arrangement with the education of mankind, considered historically” (p. 75).

Ward directly challenged the deterministic social views of Spencer. While Spencer believed that the purpose of discovering social scientific laws was to live in accordance with them, Ward believed that the purpose of these laws was to know them in order to direct them toward the social good. While Spencer believed that education and social welfare interfered with the natural order of things, Ward enthusiastically supported public interventions on behalf of the less fortunate. While Spencer believed that the characteristics of races were innate and immutable, Ward believed that the social inequality of races was largely the result of environment and education. Despite the significant differences from Spencer, Ward nevertheless employed the savage-barbarian-civilized sociological scale to depict cultural difference and believed that education represented a distancing from savagery. For example, in Dynamic Sociology, Ward (1894) expressed how education represented an “assault on savagery” because it separated the civilized from the lesser social forms. “The mark of a barbarian is not the language he speaks,” Ward (1894) insisted. “It is his rude intellectual development, his narrow range of views, his rough treatment of others” (p. 593). Ward concluded that “Everything that distinguished a savage from a civilized man can be directly or indirectly traced to differences in education” (p. 593).

Ward (1894) argued that unless one was fully assimilated to the civilized social stage, he or she could still be in a state of arrested social development, the social equivalent of a barbarian or savage. “In every large city,” he explained, “there exist throngs of barbarians—nay savages,” who would be “far better adapted to Zulu-land or the Fiji Islands” (p. 594). Although Ward recognized “differences in brain development” between savages and the civilized, he considered the sociological level of the individual to be a contingent outcome of his or her education, not of his or her inherent worth (p. 594). This was a more egalitarian view of non-Whites than most sociologists of the period. Nevertheless, Ward specifically identified the non-White social groups of “Zulu-land” and “Fiji islands” as representing the socially deficient savage stage. Ward considered the human intellect to be a contributing factor in the evolution of humankind. “In human society,” Ward (1883) argued in The Psychic Factors of Civilization, “the soul is the
great transforming agent which has worked its way up through the stages of savagery and barbarianism, to civilization and enlightenment” (p. 49). Beyond these generic stages, Ward identified three specific stages of sociological growth: autocracy, aristocracy, and democracy. As Ward concluded: “Most European countries have passed through the first two of these stages into the third. Some may be considered as still in the second, while most half-civilized, barbarous, or savage nations have not emerged from the first” (p. 317).

The sociologies of both Ward and Spencer had advocates in the United States who adopted the language of social deficiency when referring to pre-modern social groups. Franklin Giddings, a disciple of Spencer and one of the most influential sociologists of the early 20th century (Ross, 1991), made repeated references to savage life in his 1896 textbook, *Principles of Sociology*. In this text he identified the common crowd mentality of “the child and savage” and specifically identified the non-White groups of “Blackfellows of Australia, the northern Eskimo of Greenland, the Amazonian Indians of Brazil” as examples of “low savage tribes” (Giddings, 1896, pp. 138, 155). Although he recognized that “we cannot be sure that the lowest savage societies of the present day exactly reproduce all the features of primitive communities,” Giddings nevertheless considered such comparisons to be based on “reasonable assumption” (p. 264). In fact, he used these assumptions throughout his text, such as when he identified the sexual promiscuity among present-day “Innuits, Tahitians” and “once among the Aryan peoples” (p. 264). Thus, according to Giddings and most sociologists of the time, the present-day non-White societies such as “Innuits” and “Tahitians” represented the sociological equivalent of the earlier White “Aryan” groups, reinforcing the belief in the ontological inferiority of these contemporaneous non-White groups.

Albion Small was the most influential American sociologist in the reformist tradition of Ward. Like Ward and Dewey, who was Small’s colleague at the University of Chicago, Small took a more egalitarian view of non-White groups and considered their allegedly inferior status to be the result of their environment and education, not their biology. As Small (1905) wrote in his text, *General Sociology*, “All Men . . . from the most savage to the most highly civilized, act as they do act, . . . because of variations in the circumstances of their environment, both physical and social” (p. 198). Here we can see that Small rejected the inherent, anatomical, or biological inferiority of the savage but nevertheless accepted the sociological inferiority of the savage and placed the savage on a linear scale of sociological development in accordance with the theory of recapitulation. Furthermore, British scholar Benjamin Kidd (1898) expressed his recapitulationist views in his imperialist call to arms, *Control of the Tropics*. In this work Kidd argued that Westerners needed to develop principles to deal with the “natural inhabitants of the tropics” because “we are dealing with people who are
Recapitulation Theory and the New Psychology

The new psychology referred to the study of the mind using empirical and experimental data as opposed to rationalistic speculation. In addition to laboratory studies, the study of the growth of children and the study of so-called savage communities provided the kind of empirical data new psychologists needed for their conclusions. Therefore, the new psychology was also based on the depiction of non-White hunter-gather societies as sociologically deficient previous steps toward civilization. In fact, the new psychology was founded on the methodology of the comparative method, which depicted non-White social groups as the psychological equivalent of children. As Wilhelm Wundt, the founder of the new psychology, explained in *Outlines of Psychology* in 1896, “it is only the results of observations of children and savages which have been subjected to a similar psychological analysis, which furnish any proper basis for conclusions in regard to the nature of mental development in general” (Haeckel, 1902, p. 336). Likewise, as G. Stanley Hall (1894), who had studied under Wundt in Germany, outlined in his explanation of the influence of anthropology on psychology:

The origin of language, character temperament, will probably never have any solution unless they are found in the study of infancy, the growth of which epitomizes under our eyes the history of the race,
each day sometimes representing perhaps the race-development of centuries. (p. 716)

Such savage-child analogies were common in the literature on human development during the formative years of child-centered pedagogy.

For example, William Torrey Harris was founding editor of the Journal of Speculative Philosophy, superintendent of public schools in St. Louis, Missouri between 1868 and 1880, U.S. Commissioner of Education between 1889 and 1906, member of the National Education Association’s (NEA) Committee of Ten, and editor of a series of educational monographs for Appleton Press. More of a philosopher than a psychologist, Harris was the leading American educator between Horace Mann and John Dewey (Reese, 2000). In the mid-1890s, Harris attempted to reconcile his Hegelian approach to pedagogy with the emerging new psychology in his book Psychologic Foundations of Education. Hegel (1896) himself once wrote: “The individual must traverse the stages of culture already traversed by the universal spirit” (p. 112). Drawing on Hegel, Harris (1898) declared that the “greatest assistance to teacher comes from a knowledge of the three stages of thought and the three different views of the world that arise from them” (p. xi). Failure to appreciate the coordination of these stages fully, Harris admonished, could lead to “arrested development of the mind in the lower stages of its activities” (p. viii). Specifically, according to Harris, individual growth involved movement from the “atomistic” stage to the “pantheistic” stage to the “self-activity” stage (pp. vii-x, 8, 9). Thus, Harris approached Western society as the fulfillment of the highest stage of both psychological and sociological growth. Like his contemporaries, he also identified similarities between the undeveloped child and the savage adult. “The shallowest mind, the child or the savage, delight in monotonous repetition,” he explained (p. 313). “The infant and savage do not and cannot see social relations” (p. 265). Harris concluded that the movement from the second to the third stage of psychological-sociological development “takes place at a well-defined epoch in the life of the child in modern civilization,” but “in savage life is never reached” (p. 312). Thus, Harris confirmed the belief that the uncivilized savage was stuck in a state of arrested development equal to that of a child.

Other leading educators likewise praised the scientific basis of the theory of recapitulation in their work. In his book The Educative Process, educational psychologist William C. Bagley (1905) made several references to the social equivalence of children and savages, explaining how both “children and savages possess” a “great abundance of energy” and how “children and savages are laymen” in making sound judgments (pp. 103, 156). Bagley’s book included an extensive discussion of the findings of child study in which he concluded “in no uncertain terms” that the “child at different levels of his growth has different needs and capacities that must be catered
to in different ways” (pp. 197, 201). In his book *Craftsmanship in Teaching*, Bagley (1912) endorsed the theory of recapitulation outright, concluding that “the child of today, left to his own devices and operated upon in no way by the products of civilization, would develop into a savage indistinguishable in all significant qualities from other savages” (p. 37).

G. Stanley Hall was the earliest and most vocal proponent of the new education, founding advocate of the child study movement, and founding editor of the educational journal *Pedagogical Seminary* and the psychological-oriented *American Journal of Psychology* (Ross, 1972). In his classic text, *Adolescence*, Hall (1904) also echoed the view expressed by Wundt that pedagogy needed to be linked to the empirical research of the new psychology. “The animal, savage, and child-soul can never be studied by introspection,” he explained, critiquing the methodology of the old psychology. Instead, the child-savage needed to be understood in their evolutionary history by studying the growth of modern children and the ethnologies of primitive social groups because both reflected a similar stage of development (p. vii). “The child and race are keys to each other,” Hall (1904) explained, because developmentally, “the child revels in savagery” (pp. vii, x). To educate in accordance with latest psychological principles, Hall suggested that: “The teacher art should so vivify all of the resources of literature, tradition, history . . . reinforced by psychonomic recapitulatory [sic] impulses” (p. xi). Hall argued the matching of certain content and activities with the emerging “recapitulatory” instincts of the child. Hall argued that the “Indian industries, basketry, pottery, bead leather, bows and arrows,” be employed for their “educational value” by having students engage in these premodern activities like their savage ancestors did because Indian activity represented an earlier stage of development that aligned with the instincts of the young child (p. 179).

James Mark Baldwin of Princeton University was considered a major authority on child development in the 1890s, second only to Hall. Dewey cited Baldwin’s work repeatedly in his course syllabi at the University of Chicago in the 1890s (Fallace, 2011). Baldwin was also a leading recapitulationist. In his popular book, *Mental Development in the Race and Child*, Baldwin (1894) outlined what these psychological-sociological stages entailed. In his book, *Darwin and the Humanities*, Baldwin (1909) reiterated that “social life, at any stage of racial evolution” corresponds with the “personal growth and capacity of the individuals of that group at that time” (p. 93). Echoing Hall, Baldwin found great promise in the fact that “genetic study . . . in psychology, has confirmed some of the most remarkable generalizations reached in . . . Anthropology” (p. 91).

Turn-of-the-century psychologists incorporated the findings of leading anthropologists and sociologists into their cutting-edge work because the linear development of the White child and the premodern savage were considered to be parallel, if not identical. No one questioned the basic logic
behind this comparison. The parallel between sociological and psychological development was so commonsense that it often did not even need to be stated outright. For example, Harvard psychologist, Hugo Munsterberg (1909), wrote the following in his 1909 text, *Psychology and the Teacher*:

The development of the consciousness of number is a slow and a late one in the child's mind. The child may learn the mere words of the numbers early, but the real consciousness of the relations which go beyond four or five are hardly developed before school age. It is well known that primitive peoples frequently cannot count beyond three. (p. 284)

This paragraph does not make logical sense unless the reader supplies the necessary "tacitly presupposed" background knowledge, that the "child's mind" is the psychological equivalent of the mind of "primitive peoples." Without this implicit understanding—assumed to be shared by the generation of teachers to whom the book was directed—one simply cannot comprehend the passage fully.

Individually, turn-of-the-century scholars were often vague about exactly who these barbarians and savages were. But collectively in the work cited earlier, they named the inhabitants of Kamchatka, Tierra del Fuego, Dahome, Hawaii, Central Africa, New Holland, West Indian Islands, Fiji Islands, Zululand, and the Black Republic of Hayti [sic]. They named the Blackfellows of Australia, the northern Eskimos of Greenland, the Amazon Indians of Brazil, the North American Indians, Innuits, Tahitians, the Indians of Paraguay, and the Māoris of New Zealand. All of these groups were non-White, and scholars assumed all to be stuck in a childlike, sociologically deficient stage of development. The ethnocentric/racist recapitulation approach to sociological development was such a matter of common sense that no one bothered to question it. For example, in the 1890s Dewey published lengthy book reviews of Harris’s *Psychologic Foundations of Education* and Ward’s *The Psychic Foundations of Civilization*. He also reviewed major works by Kidd and Baldwin. In each case, Dewey criticized the philosophical and psychological assumptions made by each author. However, he failed to comment a single time about the authors’ overt use of the theory of recapitulation. Even for Dewey, the theory of recapitulation was a given, not worthy of comment or critique (see Dewey, 1894/1971, 1896/1972).

Recapitulation Theory and 19th-Century Child-Centered Educators

Prior to progressive education, European antecedents also subscribed to general contours of the theory of recapitulation. Jean-Jacques Rousseau had outlined specific stages of child development and sociological development and to some degree coordinated them to one another. However, unlike most
of the scholars of the 18th and 19th centuries, Rousseau did not consider the latest, civilized stage to be the greatest. In fact, he awarded his highest esteem to the savage stage because the savage had developed above the brutish ape but had not given himself over to what Rousseau considered to be the corrupting forces of civilization. As Rousseau (1775/2011) explained, “nothing can be more gentle than [man] in his primitive state, when placed by nature at an equal distance from the stupidity of the brutes and the pernicious good sense of civilized man” (p. 50). Regarding education, Rousseau emphasized the inherent goodness of the instincts of children, which roughly approximated the state of savagery, and suggested that education ought to nourish these benevolent impulses. In this sense, Rousseau was the godfather of child-centered education, something that Dewey recognized in the first chapter of his 1915 coauthored book, The Schools of To-morrow (Dewey & Dewey, 1915/1978). However, subsequent European pedagogues made a more immediate impact on the rhetoric and practice of early childhood education, and they subscribed more fully to the theory of recapitulation.

Friedrich Froebel (1906), the German inventor of the kindergarten, wrote that through “the development of the inner life of the individual man . . . the history of the mental development of the race is repeated” (p. 160). In reference to the theory of recapitulation, Froebel continued more specifically, “Inasmuch as he would understand the past and present, [the individual] must pass through all preceding phases of human development and culture” (p. 18). Similarly, German pedagogue and proponent of the object method, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, wrote: “The child masters the principles of cultivated speech in exactly the same slow order as Nature has followed with the race” (as cited in Gould, 1977, p. 149). The most famous pedagogical proponent of the application of the theory of recapitulation—although not the originator of the idea—was Johann Herbart, who wrote: “the educator shall see in the progress of his pupil a recapitulation of the great progress of mankind” (as cited in Van Liew, 1895, p. 82). His German followers such as Tuiskon Ziller and Wilhelm Rein espoused Herbart’s ideas throughout the 19th century and even drew on his theories to implement a recapitulation-based curriculum for the German primary schools.

Italian doctor, Maria Montessori, is perhaps the most enduring educator from the 19th century because interest in the Montessori method continued to grow long after the ideas of Rousseau, Frobel, Pestalozzi, and Herbart had faded. She too based her method in part on the coordination of the emerging instincts of the child with activities from the correct sociological stage. In her book The Montessori Method, which was translated to English in 1912, she related the story of her mentor, Itard, who had rescued and educated a “savage” White boy whose parents had been killed and was abandoned in a forest. “The savage of Aveyron was a child who had grown up in a natural
state,” Montessori (1912, p. 149) explained. But Itard quickly realized that the boy’s inferiority was not because “he was a degraded organism but for want of education” (p. 150). By employing innovative and experimental methods, Itard gradually and successfully led “the savage to civilization” by developing the boy “from natural life to social life” (p. 150). Based on Itard’s experience, Montessori concluded, “we must prepare man, who is one among the living creatures and therefore belongs to nature, for social life, because social life being its own peculiar work, must also correspond to manifestation of his natural activity” (p. 153). Thus, just as Rousseau, Froebel, Pestalozzi, and Herbart, Montessori also proposed that education be based on the correspondence of natural instincts with the appropriate stage of social life.

Cornel Francis W. Parker, leading proto-progressive educator in the United States, also subscribed the basic beliefs of the theory of recapitulation. Parker established an innovative child-centered curriculum in Quincy, Massachusetts, in the 1870s. He later served as principal of the Cook County Normal School in Chicago, where he continued his experiments with a less rigid and more humane style of teaching young children. In his book *Talks on Pedagogics*, Parker (1894) offered the following as a sample question and activity for students: “Show that the same characteristic area of surface has entirely different effects upon the different stages of savagery, barbarism, and civilization. What was the Valley of the Mississippi to savages? What to a civilized people?” (p. 457). Here Parker confirmed the beliefs of his contemporaries that all of the world’s societies pass through the same psychological-sociological stages of savagery, barbarism, and civilization and that American Indians represented a savage form of living that failed to develop the natural resources at their disposal due to their sociological inferiority. Earlier in the book Parker wrote, “Many savages today, will not allow themselves to be painted or photographed,” confirming that Parker believed that non-White savages still roamed the earth in the present. Parker looked to the “development of the race in civilization” as a guide for many of his ideas. “The lower the grade of development in the human race,” Parker reasoned, “the less there is known of number” (p. 258). However, regarding the theory of recapitulation, Parker only provided a lukewarm endorsement of the theory, writing:

> It may not be a valid hypothesis to say that in the mind of each child numbers are developed precisely in the order that they have been in the development of the race; still it is something of a guide in attempting to answer the question in what direction should number be developed in the child. The line of development is apparent. (pp. 92–93)

Rousseau, Froebel, Pestalozzi, Montessori, and Parker laid the philosophical foundation for engaging and celebrating the emerging instincts of the young
child and designing the curriculum to capitalize on them. Thus, the long tradition of child-centeredness that inspired the new education in the United States was grounded in the theory of recapitulation by pedagogues who subscribed to the general contours of the theory. All made commonsense references to the social deficiency of savages at a time when the word was racially coded to mean non-White. All promoted the alignment of the curriculum with children’s natural impulses and interests, which were believed to be instinctual deposits from the evolutionary history of the races. Beyond these precedents, the pedagogues of the progressive era drew on the emerging scholarship of the science of learning, which empirically affirmed many of the insights of these famous teachers. Concern for the humane treatment of the young child went hand-in-hand with a respect for the child’s inherited instincts, which originated from his or her recapitulated past.

Recapitulation Theory and the New Education

The theory of recapitulation accomplished four things for educators. First, the theory synthesized a half a century of work by leading philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists into a relatively simple and tidy idea—that the development of the individual retraced the history of the human race. Second, the theory emphasized the evolutionary and biological basis of children’s impulses and instincts, suggesting that learning would take place more efficiently if teachers nourished these instincts instead of ignoring or suppressing them. Third, the theory suggested that having young children learn about or engage in “savage” activities aligned with the students’ sociological-psychological stage. Fourth, the theory assured teachers that child-centered instruction aligned with the latest research emphasizing the engagement of students’ emerging interests, not the development of their mental faculties, which was considered outdated. As early as 1895, Dewey (1895/1972) had stated that, “The ultimate problem of all education is to coordinate the psychological and social factors” (p. 224)—that is, to coordinate the emerging instinct-stages of the child, as revealed by the findings of the new psychology, with the corresponding occupations from the history of human race that best represented them. Likewise, progressive educators Harriet Maria Scott and Gertrude Buck (1899) argued that the curriculum ought to be established on the correspondence of the instincts of children with the “representative phases or stages in world civilization” (p. 13). The coordination of the child and the historical development of the White intellectual elite lifestyle was a central focus of the new education in the United States.

In 1900, anthropologist Alexander Francis Chamberlain eloquently expressed the romantic viewpoint of the early progressive educator. “Adults emphasize too much the gap between the wisdom of childhood and their own knowledge,” Chamberlain protested, “and exterminate the
such a vision could have come from the pen of Dewey because, like Dewey, Chamberlain proposed a child-centered curriculum and humane school environment, one that allowed the children to “grow naturally” instead of being “swamped by the mass of adults around him” (p. 353). Chamberlain published his plea in a book called *Child: A Study in the Evolution of Man.* Written with the cooperation of G. Stanley Hall and “the authorities of the Bureau of American Ethnology,” Chamberlain’s study presented the most comprehensive treatment of similarities between the development of the child and the lifestyle of the savage to date (p. viii). Chamberlain’s book demonstrated the intimate relationship between the anthropological study of non-White societies, the child study movement, the theory of recapitulation, and the innovations of the new education.

Drawing on the broad evolutionary schemes of Spencer, Darwin, and Hall, Chamberlain (1900) presented a “study of the child in light of the literature on evolution, an attempt to record and, if possible, interpret some of the most interesting phenomena of human beings in the beginning in the individual and in the race” (p. vii). He dedicated an entire chapter to the “Periods of Childhood” (p. 51), in which he generated an exhaustive list of philosophers, biologists, zoologists, sociologists, and anthropologists who suggested development schemes for the individual and race. Chamberlain also noted objections and critiques to various schemes, but the overall message of the book was that there was some clear coordination between the psychological and sociological development of the White child and the non-White races, thus confirming the theory of recapitulation. Another chapter addressed “The Child as Revealer of the Past,” citing several studies pointing to the continuity between apes, savages, and Whites. For example, one study by Louis Robinson conducted on four-day-old babies had them grasp a stick and suspend themselves for 10-second intervals, which was then used to “prove” that human ancestors must have been tree dwellers (p. 229). Another study based on observations of Navajo children by W. Shufeldt concluded that

> The native instincts of these American Indians are exhibited in their young at a wonderfully tender age; and in this particular they differ vastly from our own children at a corresponding time of life, and reared as they have been for ages, in a civilized environment. (p. 232)

Shufeldt argued that White and non-White children had different instincts at different ages due to their hierarchically divergent evolutionary histories. In his chapter on “The Child and the Savage,” Chamberlain catalogued studies demonstrating the similarities in religious belief, psychical development, morals, cognitive development, memory, emotional response, language, and imagination between the White child and the non-White savage adult.
Chamberlain’s opus proved that despite several issues that were open to interpretation and dispute, the theory of recapitulation had the backing of long-standing European philosophical traditions as well as the latest studies by the scientific community. Thus, constructing a curriculum based on the coordination of the emerging instincts of the child and the stages of sociological development was not only pedagogically sound but also scientifically necessary.

Leading progressive educators aimed their theories at teachers eager for applications of the new psychology to teaching. Consequently, the instructional materials, textbooks, and curricula created at the turn of the 20th century reflected the ethnocentric assumptions inherent in the theory of recapitulation. These educational materials offered practical advice on how to coordinate the psychological stages of the child with the sociological stages of Western society. The Herbartians were perhaps the biggest proponents of a recapitulation approach to curriculum, which they called the culture-epoch theory. As Charles McMurry (1903) stated clearly in *Elements of General Method*:

> The idea of culture epochs, as typical of the steps of progress of the race and also of the periods of growth in the child, offers a deep perspective into educational problems. In the progress of mankind from a primitive state of barbarism to the present state of culture in Europe and in the United States, there has been a succession of not very clearly defined stages. . . . A child’s life up to the age of twenty is a sort of epitome of the world’s history. Our present state of culture is a result of growth, and if a child is to appreciate society as it now is, he must grow into it out of the past by having travelled through the same stages it has traced. (pp. 61–62)

McMurry (1903) gave an example of how the fictional text *Robinson Crusoe* best captured the interest of an eight-year-old because the book addressed “man’s early struggle with the forces of nature” (p. 62). Young children were believed to have an instinctual interest in Crusoe’s story because they too were at an age in which they were struggling to overcome nature. Dewey, on the other hand, objected to the matching of literacy products such as *Robinson Crusoe* or the Henry Wadsworth Longfellow poem “Hiawatha” with certain historical epochs as practiced by the Herbartians. Instead, Dewey argued that young students should be engaging with the processes of the struggles with nature themselves, not just reading about these struggles in a book. However, the difference between the Deweyan and Herbartian approaches was subtle. Dewey’s curriculum focused on the recapitulated “firsthand” processes of the past while the Herbartians focused on the literary texts that best captured the spirit of each cultural epoch. Dewey and the Herbartians, however, had a lot more in common...
because they both sought to align the stages of psychological growth with the stages of sociological progress.

In *School and Society*, Dewey (1899/1956) explained the pedagogical significance of his modified recapitulation approach to curriculum that he enacted at the University of Chicago laboratory school. “We can trace and follow the progress of mankind in history, getting an insight also into the materials used and the mechanical principles involved” (p. 20), Dewey reasoned. “In connection with these occupations the historic development of man is recapitulated” (p. 19). Dewey argued that his approach aligned with the latest psychological and anthropological research on primitive societies. Dewey related how students “go on through imagination through the hunting to the semi-agricultural stage, through the nomadic to the settled agricultural stage” (p. 53). Similarly, in *Ethical Principles Underlying Education*, Dewey (1897) insisted that

>a study of still simpler forms of hunting, nomadic and agricultural life in the beginnings of civilization; a study of the effects of the introduction of iron, iron tools, and so forth, serves to reduce the existing complexity to its simple forms. (p. 21)

Dewey based his approach on the premise that historical content taught to students should be presented as immediate problems, which also happened to have historical and scientific significance. Dewey focused his curriculum on what he dubbed “social occupations,” which were historically significant activities that aligned the emerging instincts of the child with sociological knowledge that fit each stage.

Dewey coordinated the psychological and sociological stages of human-kind with one another because he viewed the development of the human race as taking place in a similar manner as the development of the individual. As Dewey (1900/1976) explained in his essay “Some Stages of Logical Thought,” the stages he outlined represented “modes of thinking easily recognizable in the progress of both the race and individual” (p. 151). In practice, at Dewey’s University of Chicago laboratory school, this meant coordinating the earliest stages of psychological development with the savage stage of sociological development. The Dewey school curriculum was based in part on the historical reenactment of the social progress of the human race leading from savagery to barbarism to civilization. Like many other social scientists, Dewey rejected the literal—that is, biological—interpretation of the recapitulation approach to curriculum, as expressed in his essay critiquing the Herbartian culture-epoch theory. Nevertheless, like most of his contemporaries, Dewey (1896/1972b) did “not question the fact of correspondence in a general way” (p. 248) between the psychological and sociological stages of development. In fact, matching the emerging instincts of the child with the corresponding historical occupations was a central concern for Dewey and
his teachers at the University of Chicago laboratory school. Accordingly, the early years were based on primitive life. In fact, one of the first visitors to the Dewey School was initially struck by the savage-child analogy, complaining in racially overt language: “Their purpose for why we should inflame the minds of our little civilized Aryans with the ideal of a savage Indian life, I can’t see” (Blow, 1896/2005). As another early observer of the Dewey school described:

[A teacher] directed me to a class in primitive life where children had spent some weeks in working out, with the aid of the teacher, what the earliest people must have done when they had no clothing, or food, or shelter, or means of defense. She told me how they had thought of a spear by fastening a stick between the split ends of a club; how they had made bowls out of clay, and discussed caves as the first homes, and skins as the first clothing. How they had moulded in clay their ideas of man and animals in those days, and had become so interested that they had begged to write a report on their work. (Runyon, 1900, p. 591)

Yet another visitor to the Dewey School reported the significance of savage life for young students:

The study of history is preceded by that of primitive culture. The children are told of the savages who dwelt in cave, hut, or wigwam. They are shown pictures and models in illustration, and questioned as to the natural resources upon which savages must depend. . . . In natural sequence there follows the industrial life of primitive Greece, of Rome, and of the United States. (Hodgeman, 1900, p. 235)

After teachers introduced students to the corresponding form and content for each psychological and sociological stage, they eventually arrived at the modernist stage of civilization, which included the introduction of the techniques of the professional and/or expert. However, this content was to be taught sequentially in the same order that the race had originally discovered it. As a result, the social traits of non-White “primitive” societies (i.e., semi-agricultural, agricultural, nomadic) were approached as prior steps toward the industrialized West (Fallace, 2010, 2011).

The “primitive peoples” to whom Dewey referred all happened to be represented by non-European, non-White societies. In fact, students at the Dewey School were specifically led to reach these ethnocentric conclusions. As Dewey School teacher Lauren Runyon (1906) taught her students: “In getting land from the Indians the same methods were used that have prevailed through the ages when a people with a superior weapons and brains, in sufficient number, meet an inferior people” (p. 49). That is, according to Runyon, who was implementing Dewey’s educational vision, members of more technologically advanced social groups were not merely different but comparatively superior to less advanced societies. In another sample
activity from the Dewey School—reflecting the modified recapitulation scheme underlying the entire curriculum—students were instructed to “compare the American rivers with those of Africa, the Indians with the Negroes, and the degree of civilization of tribes in America with that of other peoples he has studied” (p. 55). Through such comparisons, the Dewey School students were to arrive at the conclusion that modern, civilized society had surpassed the primitive Indian and African ones in a process of linear cultural development.

Furthermore, Emily Rice, who later taught at the Dewey School, proposed several revised elementary curricula throughout the 1890s based on “both the child’s experiences and the related experiences of the race” (McMurry, 1946, p. 77). One version published in 1903 started with “Making and furnishing playhouses; comparison with the life of primitive man” in first grade and “Weaving and cooking; comparisons with primitive life in the hunter and shepherd stages” in second grade (McMurry, 1946, p. 78). In Organic Education, Harriet Maria Scott and Gertrude Buck (1899) described the experimental approach they implemented in Detroit. The curriculum they implemented with their young children was based explicitly on “typical periods of civilization” (p. 3). As Scott and Buck explained: “These periods have been chosen as satisfying the natural instinct and interests of children at certain stages in their development and seen to be consecutive in the lives of most children, as well as in the history of civilization” (p. 3). They diverged from the exact scheme of the Herbartian culture-epoch approach, but they still believed that the basis of the curriculum should be the coordination of children’s instincts and the history of the human race. In particular, they thought that the German origins of the Herbartian approach was problematic because of its overtly Christian outlook and its focus on only the history of “one or two chosen peoples” (p. 13). In place of the race-specific narrative of the Herbartians, Scott and Buck suggested a more process-informed history of the race tracing all of the mankind through the stages of development like Dewey had done at his laboratory school. For second grade, they focused specifically on “Primitive Man: savagery and barbarianism, showing development of satisfaction of fundamental needs of food, clothing, shelter” (p. 291). Like Dewey, they were careful to incorporate the arts and other key components of civilization throughout their curriculum, so they were far less dependent on the strict sequence of the culture epochs than the Herbartians.

As the theory of recapitulation became more popular as a rationale for child-centered pedagogy, some educators suggested slight modifications. In an article for the journal The Elementary School Teacher, Katherine Dopp (1903) explained the importance of recognizing the “differences as well as the likeness in the attitudes of primitive man and the child” (p. 625). The savage had many weaknesses that would not be appropriate for the modern world such as his violence and antisocial tendencies, so
certain qualitative revisions needed to be made to the historically arranged curriculum for it to be effective. As Dopp reminded her readers, “The real attitude of the savage, fortunately, is not a normal one in child-life today [sic]” (p. 626). The focus of the teacher was to prevent arrested development in the child by using the sociological stages of development as a guide. However, Dopp admonished that one should not follow the historical sequence too strictly.

Other works drawing on child study and the new psychology made additional child-savage analogies. Educator Walter Schell (1899), in an article on the value of play in the development of the child, explained, “The truth of evolution is illustrated in the growth of every individual, and the child reproduces the social history of the race in his play.” In this self-proclaimed “progressive” journal, Schell pointed out how “Savage and inferior races have little capacity for play” (pp. 214–215). Furthermore, Michael O’Shea (1903), a professor of education at the University of Wisconsin, cited Dewey, Herbart, Harris, Baldwin, and Sully to conclude, “All evidence indicates that the individual’s development is a kind of recapitulation of this racial course” because “analytic activity appears relatively late in the child and as it has appeared late in the race” (p. 177). Again citing Dewey in Dynamic Factors in Education, published the next year, O’Shea (1904) reiterated the theory that “the child in his individual development recapitulates in his interest the industrial history of the race” (p. 69). Even Charles Eliot (1909), president of Harvard University, confirmed his belief in the theory of recapitulation, writing, “For the savage or semi-civilized man, and for some children who pass through barbaric stages of development, authority is needed to restrain them from injuring themselves” (pp. 21–22). Thus, Eliot confirmed that savage and semi-civilized men and children were to some degree psychological-sociological equivalents. Likewise, Nicholas Murray Butler (1900), president of Columbia University, agreed, writing, “The course of evolution in the race and in the individual furnishes us also with the clue of the natural order and the real relationship of studies” (pp. 320–321).

Perhaps University of Chicago sociologist George Vincent (1897) stated the best example of the revised theory of recapitulation in his dissertation, The Social Mind and Education. In this work, Vincent expressed what was, essentially, Dewey’s approach to the theory:

> The parallel between the development of the individual and that of the race . . . has been subjected to criticism. . . . Educationally the theory of parallel development is fruitful in suggestions, but it may easily be made the basis of artificial schemes, such as certain doctrinaire forms of the “Culture Epoch theory.” . . . The real parallel is in the process, the progress from analysis to synthesis, and in the gradual development of fully self-consciousness effort out of vaguely conscious effort. (pp. vii-viii)
Vincent defended this position throughout the text by pointing to the excesses of educators who interpret the theory of recapitulation too literally instead of using the theory as a general basis for the curriculum. He argued that recapitulating the historical processes themselves was more important than recapitulating the content corresponding with each epoch. Despite this subtle refashioning of the theory, Vincent never doubted that savage groups represented an earlier psychological-sociological stage of cultural development equivalent to a child.

Likewise, Irving King espoused a similar view in his first book, *The Psychology of Child Development*. In the preface Dewey fully endorsed King’s approach, which Dewey dubbed the “functional-genetic standpoint” to child psychology (King, 1903, p. xvii). In this study, King confirmed Dewey’s pragmatic approach to the theory of recapitulation, that psychological-sociological stages of man were contingent outcomes of cultural history, not the unraveling of a latent biological potential as suggested by Hall and Haeckel. “That the individual passes through certain biologic stages should be regarded, not as proof of an evolution from a lower form,” King (1903) insisted, “but rather as evidence as to what course of evolution has been, once granted that it is a fact” (p. 158). Like Dewey, King suggested that teachers focus only on those stages of psychological-sociological development that had meaning in the present, not necessarily lead students through each particular stage. As King explained,

> We do not mean to say that the study of the backward reference in the child’s life is not necessary, but that the value of such study for the teacher consists solely in applying it to the elucidation of its significance in the child’s present experience. (p. 162)

Nevertheless, King confirmed the underlying belief inherent in the theory of recapitulation that the child was the psychological-sociological equivalent of the savage adult and vice versa. The child’s “mythmaking stage is not a result of his savage ancestry, but of the fact that he has an underdeveloped mind, and undeveloped minds have pretty definitive ways of reacting the world over, whether their possessors be children or savages” (p. 173). In other words, even though the savage adult was not anatomically or biologically limited to that stage of development, nor was the child biologically determined to pass through the savage stage, the two were still equivalent because they were both “undeveloped,” and they shared the same psychological-social deficiencies.

Over the early years of the 20th century, the theory of recapitulation evolved from the literal unraveling of a latent biological potential, as espoused by Hall, to a less literal, historical reenactment of the sociological and occupational activities of the human race, as espoused by Dewey and his followers. Either way, the message was the same: Young children were predisposed to be interested in the same ideas and activities as savage
non-White adults. Thus, child-centered pedagogy entered the curriculum in the United States, justified by the same ethnocentric and racist premise as the theory of recapitulation—that non-White adults were the psychological-sociological equivalent of White children.

Conclusion

The theory of recapitulation fell out of favor by the 1920s for several reasons. First, the theory was inherently Eurocentric and racist because it pointed to the Western world as the culmination of all of human progress. In particular, the theory of recapitulation depicted non-White social groups as previous steps toward the West on a universal, linear scale of human development. Anthropologist Franz Boas and later his students, such as Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and A. L. Kroeber, presented evidence to the contrary, and they attacked the theory of recapitulation for its ethnocentric and racist implications (see Boas, 1896, 1901). As Kroeber (1915) explained, “The estimation of the adult savage as similar to the modern European child is superficial and prevents his proper appreciation either biologically or historically” (p. 286). Second, the rediscovery of Mendelian genetics in 1900 problematized many of the biological assumptions upon which the theory was based. Specifically, Mendelian genetics overturned the doctrine of the transmission of acquired characteristics (known as neo-Lamarckianism), which was a major component of biological and anatomical version of the theory (Barkan, 1992; Stocking, 1968). Third, the rise of the behavioral psychology of Edward L. Thorndike and John B. Watson deflected attention away from instinct theory and genetic psychology and refocused the field on the significance of immediate reinforcements in the environment (Cravens & Burnham, 1971; Richards, 1987). Ironically, Thorndike was the most outspoken critic of the theory of recapitulation among progressive educators (see Thorndike, 1913, pp. 258, 279), despite his endorsement of the even more racist theory of eugenics. Finally, the growing impact and prestige of the disciplines of sociology and anthropology provided further evidence for the significance of environment and education on human development. These emerging fields adopted a more interactionist, as opposed to a biologically deterministic, paradigm (Cravens, 1978). As a result, social scientists adopted a more presentist and less historicist outlook on human development. In fact, two of the most significant publications in postwar child-centered pedagogy, William Heard Kilpatrick’s (1918) “The Project Method” and Harold Rugg and Anna Shumaker’s (1928) The Child-Centered School, ignored the theory of recapitulation, confirming that by the 1920s the child-centered pedagogy had largely moved beyond concern for the stages of psychological-sociological development. Nevertheless, as argued previously, the child-centeredness
Kilpatrick and Rugg endorsed had first entered the curriculum through a rationale that drew on the theory of recapitulation. Although scholars abandoned the literal application of the theory of recapitulation to education by the 1920s, many of the core ideas remained. For example, the educational belief in the sociological deficiency of people of color continued until the 1960s and beyond, culminating in Oscar Lewis’s (1959) “culture of poverty” thesis. In addition, the application of genetic psychology and stage theory to curriculum—most notably the research of Jean Piaget—remained, although these stage theories have largely been stripped of their cultural correspondence (see Egan, 2002; Gould, 1977). The teaching and reenacting of Native American life in some early elementary social studies curricula in the United States can also, to some degree, trace its historical roots to the theory of recapitulation (Halvorsen, 2013). Ultimately, the idea that teachers should nourish a child’s natural and instinctual curiosity never disappeared. However, educators have largely forgotten that child-centered pedagogy emerged from the pervasive ethnocentric/racist belief in the equivalence of White children and non-White adults.

References


Savage Origins of Child-Centered Pedagogy


Manuscript received November 13, 2013
Final revision received November 3, 2014
Accepted November 4, 2014