

*Education's Abiding Moral Dilemma: Merit and worth in the cross-Atlantic democracies, 1800-2006*

Sheldon Rothblatt

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*Reviewer: Deborah A. Sabric*

The historian's dilemma is often not rooted in the plethora of eras, people or ideas to be researched for the potential material is vast and often unexplored. The challenge lies in selecting a topic for investigation that has saliency in its ability to focus upon a new and uncultivated area of research thereby raising new questions and furthering debate.

In *Education's abiding moral dilemma: merit and worth in the cross-Atlantic democracies, 1800-2006*, Sheldon Rothblatt explores the rich history of higher education in England, Scotland and the United States by contextualizing the historical narrative and rooting his examination not in egalitarianism but on a more fundamental discussion of merit and worth. The primary thesis of the volume is that the competing notions of merit and worth fuel the debate over access to and quality of education within transatlantic democracies.

From the beginning, Rothblatt engages the reader as he lays out his argument and concretizes the operational concepts utilised in this comparative history of education. Presuming that this is not a volume that will be read by or was written solely for historians, Rothblatt establishes a clear foundation for his debate in describing the nuances between social and liberal democracy and the impact that the differences will have in our understanding of why we educate, who we educate and what are the issues surrounding access to higher education. He then unpacks the subtleties of linguistic expression and explores how the choice of one set of terms in England and another in the US can lead to misunderstandings in comparative research, something that he clearly wishes to avoid. In one sense, it is this attention to detail and the creation of sound conceptual understanding for his readers that makes this account a vital read in the history of education.

Having established his parameters, Rothblatt moves through a thorough examination of education, both at the institutional and systemic levels. Although the volume focuses primarily on higher education, he does not envision higher education in a vacuum untouched by outside influences. Instead, he examines the construction of educational systems and the relationship between compulsory education and universities on a transatlantic axis noting the differences along the way. This leads on to a historical exposition of high stakes examinations including the rationale for testing our students, the outcomes of the different examination systems on individuals and societies and the implications for higher education. At each turn, he uses cogent examples to fully explain the ideas to those unfamiliar with either system thereby providing an unaffected but powerful account for the reader.

Sheldon Rothblatt's volume does not simply detail historical differences in transatlantic secondary and higher education but opens up a vital debate for democratic governments to consider. Having educated by merit or worth in the past, is this still the path to take today or can another member of the transatlantic family suggest differing ways forward? In challenging educational times, his volume provides thinking points for policy-makers, educationists and citizens alike.