

History Teachers' Forum

THE NEW CHALLENGE TO THE SOCIAL STUDIES*

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It is generally acknowledged that recent economic and social changes have numerous and significant implications for education, and particularly for that field of education embracing the social studies. The case may be stated somewhat in the following manner.

The nineteenth century and the opening decades of the twentieth century were marked by tremendous advances in the physical sciences and their application. Goods and services were produced with amazing speed. New enterprises almost without number sprang into being. A magnificent edifice of credit was erected. For a time there seemed to be no limit to the number of new recruits that could be used in this conquest and enslavement of the forces of the material world. Inanimate power assumed the major portion of the world's work, displacing the physical drudgery of men, but still it seemed that more jobs were created than were destroyed.

Why then, with all this efficiency, are we in the mess in which we find ourselves today? A complete answer to this question cannot be given in a brief space, but the essential facts may be summed up as follows: social, economic and political machinery was not being developed at anything like the speed with which new forces were being developed and put to work by the physical sciences. The inevitable result was collapse.

Wherein is the challenge to the social studies? It is often held that, if education functioned properly, technological advancement and the necessary social and economic adjustments would not be allowed to proceed at such widely divergent rates. Is it reasonable to blame education for not preventing economic breakdown? If so, a large share of the responsibility must be borne by teachers and writers in the field of the social studies.

Regardless of whether we have been at fault, the present disorder opens up a number of questions that must be considered by social studies teachers. What is the proper relation be-

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tween our subject and the changes that are made in social and economic theory and organization? Should we be content merely to trace the development of present institutions and practices, or should we attempt to point the way to a new social order? If we are to build for the future, who shall determine the direction of our efforts?

Any attempt to lay the foundation for social and economic institutions adequate for present and future needs would inevitably meet with determined opposition from privileged groups and from the self-appointed guardians of the established order. As Professor Overstreet points out, any thorough-going reforms would most certainly be opposed by chambers of commerce, the military legions, and the sons and daughters of this, that and the other. We need these conservative influences, of course, to hold in check the forces of radicalism, but, if we are to have any genuine progress, we dare not intrust the destinies of our society solely to their hands.

Some will say that we need not have as an objective any particular type of social order. It is our task to present the facts and let the facts speak for themselves. This ideal may be approached in advanced college classes, and particularly in history courses, but even here one must face the question of what facts to present and with what emphasis. Fortunately the decision in respect to what to teach in the college is, within rather broad limits, left to the instructors. This is not to say that college teachers always enjoy complete intellectual freedom or that positions are not sometimes sacrificed because of "liberal" ideas, but in the high school the teacher is much more subject to the powers that be.

Furthermore, if we are to teach only undisputed facts, are we to rule out planning and experimentation? These have been the basis for our phenomenal advance in the physical sciences. Should they not be applied to social problems?

What we need in America is not a new and radical "ism." We need first to analyze the institutions under which we have lived and prospered in the past, and then to adjust these institutions to our new conditions. We must be willing to face unpleasant facts and accept some changes that we would prefer to avoid. Thus, however much one may deplore the passing of the era of *laissez faire* economy, the fact re-

mains that this system cannot function under modern conditions. Some form of regulation is inevitable. If we are reasonable, we may be able to solve the problem and yet preserve many of the benefits of the old system. If we insist on being unreasonable, the answer must be some sort of dictatorial control as the only alternative of chaos.

As teachers of social studies, we do not want a program of instruction dictated by the government or by special groups. We want to be able to explore at will all the aspects of any problem and to examine objectively any suggested program of action. A detailed scheme of social studies instruction to be followed by all teachers of the subject everywhere, even though it be evolved by teachers themselves, would be undesirable, but, with the aid of specialists in our field, we should be able to lay down a few broad general principles upon which we could safely build.

If we are to meet the challenge of training for life in the emerging social order, we must first become social philosophers. In the words of Professor Mahoney, of Boston University, we must examine our "way of life to discover its highlights and its shadows, its idiosyncrasies and ineptitudes, its nature and its needs."¹

Here is the answer of Professor Charles A. Ellwood to the question before us:

At least one-third of every student's time should be devoted to the social studies from the kindergarten to the end of the A.B. course. Only thus can the social, political, and economic ignorance which now beclouds the minds of our people be dissipated. . . . If we are going to have social education we must educate the emotions as well as the intelligence. It is idle to suppose that intelligence alone can solve our social problems as long as we continue to cultivate ignoble and anti-social emotions. The whole man needs to be socialized if our schools are to produce the genuinely good citizen. Social imagination and social sympathy must be cultivated if social information is to be rightly apprehended.²

A commission of the American Historical Association is working on the Social Studies in the Schools. The Report of this Commission will run to sixteen volumes when the whole is completed and published. The first volume, *A Charter for the Social Studies in the Schools* came from the press in 1931.

¹ John J. Mahoney, "A New Deal for the Social Studies", in *Education*, May, 1934.

² Charles A. Ellwood, "The Cost of Sociological Ignorance", in *ibid.*

The final volume, entitled *Conclusions and Recommendations of the Commission* was recently published. From the section of this volume, "Educational Philosophy for the United States," the following is quoted:

Whatever may be the exact character of life in the society now emerging, it will certainly be different in important respects from that of the past. It will be accompanied by many unaccustomed restraints and liberties, responsibilities and opportunities; and whether it will be better or worse will depend in large measure upon the standards of appraisal applied, the particular choices now made within the limits of the possible, and the education of the rising generation in knowledge, thought, and appreciation of its necessities and potentialities.

In two respects education will be challenged: (a) the emerging economy will involve the placing of restraints on individual enterprise, propensities, and acquisitive egoism in agriculture, industry, and labor and generally on the conception, ownership, management, and use of property, as the changing policies of government already indicate; and (b) the emerging economy, by the reduction of hours of labor and other measures, promises to free the ordinary individual from the long working day, exhausting labor and economic insecurity, thus providing him with opportunities for personal development far greater and richer than those enjoyed under the individualistic economy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.³

In regard to the applications of this educational philosophy, the *Report* included some paragraphs provocative of thought:

If the school is to justify its maintenance and assume its responsibilities, it must recognize the new order and proceed to equip the rising generation to co-operate effectively in the increasingly interdependent society and to live rationally and well within its limitations and possibilities.

It thus follows that educators are called upon to examine critically the frame of reference under which they have been operating, and to proceed deliberately to the clarification and affirmation of purpose in the light of the changed and changing social situation and in the light of those facts and trends which remain compelling, irrespective of individual preferences.

Educators stand today between two great philosophies of social economy: the one representing the immediate past and fading out in actuality, an individualism in economic theory which has become hostile in practice to the development of individuality for great masses of the people and threatens the survival of American society; the other representing and anticipating the future on the basis of actual trends—the future already coming into reality, a collectivism which may permit the widest development of personality or lead to a bureaucratic tyranny

³ See vol. XVI of the *Report*, 33-34.

destructive of ideals of popular democracy and cultural freedom.

If education continues to emphasize the philosophy of individualism in economy, it will increase the accompanying social tensions. If it organizes a program in terms of a philosophy which harmonizes with the facts of a closely integrated society, it will ease the strains of the transition taking place in actuality. The making of choices cannot be evaded, for inaction in education is a form of action.⁴

Never before have teachers of the social studies been confronted by graver responsibilities and larger opportunities than those before them today. They must chose between making a contribution to the development of citizens for the new social order or preparing students for participation in a system that no longer exists. May they have the wisdom and the courage to cast their lot for human progress.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 85-87.