

History Teachers' Forum

ORGANIZING HISTORY FOR TEACHING

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Two surface precipitations in present discussion of social and economic questions are marked by the tendency to start with the year 1929 and the idea that the complexity of the current situation is so great that analysis and constructive suggestions are impossible. Copyright dates of books assume an undue importance. Whatever the subject under consideration, if the book were copyrighted before 1929, the value of the work is immediately and seriously discounted. Facts and ideas judged sound before 1929 are considered obsolete and inapplicable to this post-1929 decade. The post-1929 decade, or the partial decade of the thirties, is thought so chaotic, so complex, so confused as to defy the necessary analysis that constructive suggestion for improvement and advance may be made. The second attitude is the result of the first and the net result of the two combined is mental fear and the paralysis of defeatism or rationalized inertia.

It is submitted that though there may appear to be some basis for the two attitudes that the result of them is unfortunate, at least in its extremity, that the case is not hopeless. We can do something about the situation. It is further submitted—and this is the *raison d'être* of the remarks that follow—that both the two attitudes and the resultant state of mind are to some degree the products of the methods of teaching history in the public schools. Reference is here made to those methods which stress narrative and recall at the expense of interpretation, application, and creativity. Facts are indispensables but they are the materials for *use* in thought—for interpretation, for application to the present, for use in creating an organized, unified outlook on life. The emphasis should be on ideational not factual history. Facts, may it be repeated, are essentials but the use of them should be centered upon and should insure their social utility not their neglect.

The decrease in the use and the subordination, if not the abandonment, of the "page to page" textbook assignment, of the distortion of the Socratic method known as the "question-and-answer" method and of other memoriter techniques in favor of topical arrangement was indication of dissatisfaction

with them. The subsequent favor extended to the "unit" denotes a realization of the importance of relationships. Yet the so-called "units" ordinarily are merely topics or "blocks" of material whose choice is dictated by chronology, class room convenience or some consideration extraneous to the true nature of the subject. An unit in history may even be an organization of related events, thoughts, feelings and/or conditions and yet violate the true nature of the subject. In too many cases the same collection of materials used previously with memoriter techniques are simply called Unit IV or Unit VII as the case may be. Publishers of textbooks have grouped the first three chapters of a previously published book as Unit I and Chapters IV, V, VI, and VII as Unit II, and so on. With only the table of contents changed the book has been republished as an unit history. Such units lack a core idea, an organizing principal, a central theme. They are artificial. The "unit" organization has much in its favor but the unit must be natural and not book-made or school-made.

How may units be natural? They may be natural only when they are phases or manifestations of the great underlying forces and causes, of the innate human urges, of the great historical movements. What is an historical movement? One definition is that an historical movement is a natural world trend around which cluster associated or related events, thoughts, feelings, and/or conditions. A trend is comparable to the theme in a Bach fugue or the plot of a story. It is a dynamic idea which moves along its course like a planet drawing satellites unto itself. It is comparable to a magnet drawn between two rows of steel filings pulling them unto itself. It may be compared to the string of a strand of beads. The string is the movement idea, the core idea, the organizing principle, the unifying theme which holds the beads together. The beads represent the phases or the manifestations of the idea. They are the units which themselves are held together as individual entities and in relation to each other by the movement idea. These phases become actual units of study.

The story of mankind is the story of these movements for these movements are history. Once they are mastered all else is illustration. All history would be organized for

teaching purposes around these movements. One example would be the humanitarian movement. Examples of phases of the humanitarian movement which would become units of related study are the anti-slavery crusade, the temperance crusade, the evolution of the public school, world peace, religious tolerance, political liberalism, extension of suffrage, and labor organization. These would be the beads along the string. A second example would be the world movement for national unification. Studied as a movement the national unification of Germany, Italy, Japan, Brazil, Chile, and the United States, culmination about 1871, would be seen as phases or manifestations of the same dynamic urge. The unification of the United States would be related in thought to the same development in these other countries. Germany may have had Treitschke, Schiller, Fichte, and Goethe laying the basis for unity, but the United States had Bancroft, Longfellow, Lowell, Emerson, and Whittier. The trilogy of wars of 1864, 1866, and 1870 may have been cruel measures, but so were the cartridges and bayonets of the armies of the North in the Civil War which was not merely a struggle between two sections in a single nation but a part of a great world movement. Already the slavery issue has been considered as but one phase of something much larger—the humanitarian movement. Proper perspective and sense of values are promoted. Likewise could illustration be given in terms of other movements—the Industrial Revolution or the Westward Movement.

Through the study of history in terms of movements does one develop a sense of continuity, of development, of evolution. Events succeed events and through them flow these urges as organizing principles. Through a study of parallels a sense of balance and assurance is derived. The movements are the parallel threads, the warp, and the cross-references are the woof woven on the shuttle of history by universal human nature. A sense of relationships of design and pattern is born. Understandings of where we have been, of where we are, of how we got this way, serve as bases of anticipation of whither we are going or at least *trending*. It becomes unnecessary to be so completely harassed and harrowed, to feel so absolutely impotent. Human affairs are understandable, even mutable. Something has been done and can be done about them. The trend may not be stemmed but it may be understood and, perhaps, channeled and given direction.