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ABSTRACT

This document reports on a summer institute for 20 secondary school history teachers from the central Virginia public school community. Emphasis at the institute was on the fact that historically, as well as morally, all people are important. This idea is the basis for the "new social history" that tends to start with everyday experience. Because most U.S. high school history teachers completed their education before the development of an emphasis on social history, an institute was held to engage them in discussions about social history. The two-week seminar began each day with a lecture of 45 to 60 minutes by an historian, sociologist, or anthropologist and was followed by discussions. Ten books germane to the "new social history" served as a focus for the institute. Ten lecturers addressed four themes: (1) mobility and community; (2) religiousness; (3) a nation of immigrants; and (4) changing notions of the character and make-up of the family. Stephen Innes, Associate Professor of History, University of Virginia, addressed the question of why so much social history involves studies of neighborhoods and small towns. Robert Cross, Professor of History, University of Virginia, suggested that the questions asked since 1945 generated the new social history. An evaluation of the institute by the directors suggested that, even though the lecturers were outstanding, the discussions were not as animated as hoped because of the constraining factors of the risky nature of the subject matter and the participants' unfamiliarity with each other. (SM)

SOCIAL HISTORY:
A SUMMER INSTITUTE FOR
HIGH SCHOOL UNITED STATES HISTORY TEACHERS

by

Robert D. Cross

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Abstract

This article reports a summary of a summer institute for twenty secondary history teachers. The major goal of the summer institute was to engage United States history teachers through selected textbooks and provocative lectures, to provide the bases for lively discussion, in which questions could be raised, hypotheses tried out, not just about the particular subjects studied, but about cognate themes, issues, personalities. events. From the two week experience, the authors conclude that social history - or the humanities - is not something, primarily, that one "gets," but something one "does."

Social History: A Summer Institute for High School United States History Teachers

INTRODUCTION

In 1980, the Rockefeller Commission on the Humanities suggested that a dramatic improvement in quality of education for our high schools is the highest educational priority for America. Other professional educators and scholars have expressed similar sentiments. Strengthening the humanities enhances the linkage between skills, knowledge, and values--essentials necessary to improve the calibre of education in our high schools. In view of the continuing demands for improvement in teaching the humanities, we implemented a summer institute in social history.

PURPOSE

During the last fifteen or twenty years, the most exciting perspectives in the study of United States history have emerged from what is often labeled "the new social history." It has a number of hallmarks. Some sloganeers have called it "history from the bottom up," in a way reminiscent of the unfortunate phrase of the late Arthur Meier Schlesinger that he wanted to write the history of the "nobodies." Of course, the real point is that, historically as well as morally, all people are important; it was the unconscious presupposition of previous generations of historians that history ought to preoccupy itself with kings, and presidents, and archbishops. The new social history tends to start with everyday experience, rather than with institutional structures (important and interesting in themselves

of course).

Three examples may help clarify the shift of emphasis:

a) explore the varieties of religious experience instead of (at least before) describing denominational, organizational arrangements, or the theology defined and redefined.

b) try to show who were regarded as children, as youth, as "adolescents," and to show what kind of behavior was expected of them--and how they behaved, in family, work, and leisure. Place relatively less emphasis on institutions of formal education, child labor laws, etc.

c) define how the dominant, or "host" culture, regarded "strangers," such as those of foreign-origin, distinctive "race," or alien religion, rather than subsuming such realities under vague metaphors like "the melting-pot," or concentrating on occasional, dramatic outbursts of "biogtry" or immigration restriction.

Professional scholars find these questions exciting, not because of some ideological commitment, but because of their conviction that they are exploring the matters most important to the people they study (and, not incidentally, to the people they teach). The resulting scholarship is beginning to be reflected in college textbooks. But most teachers in high schools got their training before these emphases began to surface; and standard high school texts generally reflect the older presuppositions as to what history was "about."

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States history teachers through selected textbooks and provocative lectures, to provide the bases for lively discussion, in which questions could be raised, hypotheses tried out, not just about the particular subjects studied, but about cognate themes, issues, personalities, events.

AUDIENCE

The audience for the summer Institute were high school teachers in the central Virginia public school community. The varied school divisions were contacted, via letter, requesting the superintendent or social studies supervisor to recommend two master teachers to participate in the Social History Institute. Twenty history teachers accepted the invitation to participate in the summer program.

PROCEDURES

The two-week summer seminar began each day with a lecture of 45 to 60 minutes by an historian, sociologist or anthropologist, followed by a question - and answer, challenge - and response hour. After an hour for lunch, the group reassembled for discussion of the book-of-the-day. Two or three of the high school history teachers organized and led the discussion. These meetings were intended to encourage the participants to articulate, and, where appropriate, debate both what had been worthwhile (or not) in the morning session, and to consider an emblematic work of social history. The directors did not wish to structure the discussion. They did not want the participants to feel obliged to recite what they had learned.

THE PROGRAM

Theme One: Mobility and community

Americans have been, arguably, the most mobile people in history. Immigration and the "westward movement" are obvious examples, but we now know that at all times and places (though for not always similar reasons) there has been an enormous amount of moving. For example, a city like Boston grew by 100,000 in the decade of the 1880's, yet no more than 20% of the people there in 1890 had been there in 1880, and most of them had moved at least once while remaining in the city. Much the same seems to be true of rural areas, and small towns. The causes and consequences of such frenetic movement need to be examined. And the fazing question has to be posed: how in such a mobil society was even a modicum of "community" achieved?

Day 1. Speaker: Stephen Innes, Associate Professor of History, University of Virginia, discussed why so much of the "new social history" involved studies of neighborhoods and small towns, suggesting that when well-done, such studies yielded insights into the general history of the culture. He referred frequently to Robert Gross' book, The Minutemen and Their World which was to be discussed in the afternoon.[1] He also commented on two books of his own: Myne Owne Ground (written with T.H. Breen) which discusses the life of free blacks in 17th century Virginia, and Labor and Land, a newly published study of 17th century Springfield, Massachusetts.

Day 2. Speaker: Robert Cross, Professor of History,

University of Virginia, in a painfully autobiographical talk, suggested how the questions asked in the period since 1945 generated the new social history. The key figure in America was Oscar Handlin of Harvard, who mediated between his mentor, the elder Schlesinger, and historians beginning to write in the 1960's. Cross illustrated the transition by showing how the study of American religion had changed from the study of theology and church organization to inquires into who worshipped, how, and, to the extent possible, why.[2] Somewhat similarly, the history of education was frequently redefined from a preoccupation with philosophy, funding and organization to an interest in who went to school, who were the teachers, what was inculcated and what simply taken for granted.

Day 3. Speaker: Dorothy Ross, Associate Professor of History, University of Virginia, examined social class and social stratification in America, present and past. Among the texts she drew on were de Tocqueville's Democracy in America; Robert and Helen Lynd's Middletown (the text to be discussed that afternoon),[3] and findings of the 1970 and 1980 census.

Theme Two: America's religiousness

Denis Brogan once declared that America is a "shockingly religious country." He referred of course to the unusual extent to which most Americans have looked to "religion" not only to give primary definition to their value-system, but also to provide the organizational framework for much of their lives.

(Of course, some Americans have found religion the most available object against which to revolt.) There has been almost a dizzying variety of ways in which Americans have given expression to their religiousness.

Day 4. Speaker: Melvin Urofsky, Professor of History, Virginia Commonwealth University, sketched the history of Jews and Judaism in America from 1654. He contrasted the commitments and the experience of four groups: Sephardim (from 1654); "Germans" (in the second half of the nineteenth century); Eastern Europeans (from around 1880 through 1924), and Yoredim from Israel since the Seven Days' War. A sizable number of participants professed almost no familiarity with Jews and Judaism, and a fair amount of time was spent exchanging information and views. This is a subject of such poignance to most Americans that it is usually agreed not to discuss it among strangers, certainly not in school. The afternoon discussion of Herberg's admittedly contentious arguments occasionally got lost in quite passionate statements of personal belief and experiences (and in the relaxed judgment of one participant that religion really didn't matter).[4] Professor Cross, who thinks it does, ventured some sober observations, which one participant candidly characterized as "either sentimental or naive."

Day 5. Speaker: William King, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, University of Virginia, argued that most contemporary students of religious life were heavily

influenced by the anthropological work of Clifford Geertz, who defined "religion" as a system of symbols, myths, and rituals that establish powerful moods and motivations...[and] fundamental dispositions toward life. King readily admitted that this broad a conception complicated things, but it enabled scholars, he thought, to deal more realistically a wide gamut of behavior and belief, all of it somehow, in some sense, religious. King ranged rather freely over American history to illustrate his argument.[5]

Day 6. Speaker: Jeffrey Haden, Professor of Sociology, University of Virginia, drew on his recent publications to advance four propositions: (1) the so-called "wall of separation of church and state" is not constitutionally defined; (2) one can understand neither political or religious life in America if one starts with the premise of "separation"; (3) free exercise of religion, supposedly guaranteed by the First Amendment, has almost constantly, everywhere, been in jeopardy; (4) at present, major threats to religious freedom come from the judiciary (which also, of course, sometimes protects freedom), from bureaucracy, and large political and economic structures; and from the "tyranny of the majority." Beyond the Melting Pot was the text discussed that afternoon.[6]

Theme Three: "A nation of immigrants."

This phrase, popularized by John F. Kennedy's pamphlet, has proved a useful rubric for studying not only the immigrants, but

also their descendants. From this perspective, one can explore the sources of "ethnicity" (primarily national origin, race, and religion), and the way in which enthnicity has waned and waxed. It is important to note the "myths" describing this complex process, like "the melting-pot," and to examine periods and occasions of hostility and tension, as well as a general process of accommodation.

Day 6. Speaker: John Higham, Professor of History, The Johns Hopkins University, discussed what now seemed to him to be the limited perspective of his prize-winning book, Strangers in the Land (1953), - the book to be discussed that afternoon.[7] He hypothesized that the fluctuations of prosperity and depression that he had used to explain changing American attitudes towards the foreign-born, did not "work" for the period, 1890-1914. He then presented a more complex, still tentative explanation centering on a culture-wide preoccupation with "purity." Higham is probably the most distinguished American historian of his generation, and he responded with aplomb to some strenous, some eloquent, and some indignant questions.

Day 7. Speaker: Armstead Robinson, Associate Professor of History, University of Virginia., talked about slavery in America, partly agreeing with and partly dissenting with the argument of his Yale colleague John Blassingame, whose Slave Community was to be discussed in the afternoon.[8] Robinson advanced four arguments: (1) the African heritage was never washed out of blacks, even by slavery; (2) there was a wide variety of personality types in slavery (it is

foolish to argue that all were "heroes," or that all were "sambos;" (3) there was always, even in slavery, a strong sense of "family" even in the face of repression; (4) most slaves resisted slavery as best they could.

Theme Four: Changing notions of the character, and make-up, of the family

A good deal of interesting work has been done on the changing nature of the "life-cycle," which involved, among other things; the emerging definition of childhood, youth, adolescence, and old age. A great deal has been learned about the history of women, including the increasing specialization of character and role, first inside the home, and progressively (though not evenly) outside the home--in schools, factories, benevolent organizations and politics. (For example, throughout our history most women have worked very hard; only recently, has the Census listed as "working women" those who worked outside the home, for pay. Why?)

Day 8. Speaker: Millicent Aron, Assistant Professor of History, University of Virginia, spoke on the entrance of women into the clerical workforce, particularly into the federal government in the last decades of the nineteenth century. She noted that stemmed partly from the fact that women would accept lower wages than men, and partly from changes in both male and female attitudes about what was woman's "proper sphere."[9]

Day 9. Speaker: Marion Ross, Associate Professor of

Anthropology, University of Virginia, discussed how anthropologists thought about, and analyzed the family in American culture. She noted, among other things, that there has been a decline in the nuclear family in America; by the early nineteenth century, men began to play a markedly lesser role in "child-rearing"; in the last few decades, women have steadily decreased the number of years in which they bear children.[10]

EVALUATION OF THE SOCIAL HISTORY FORMAT

1) The humanities are sometimes thought of as a series of great books. The Institute put in the possession of each participant ten books germane to the "new social history." Whether the ages will judge them to be "great books" is a question that may be left to the ages to decide. They have all provided lively interest and strong feelings from a wide audience of people usually thought to be cultivated. The ten books certainly added up to more words than the most sedulous student could read carefully in a fortnight. It's possible to hope that the participants will in the future turn back to at least some of the books, which they have been obliged to skim, and find their points of view of interest. arguments worth pondering, even information to "use."

2) The lecturers, certainly an all-star cast by university standards, gave performances of differing merit, as judged both by the directors and the participants. Because the lecturers were teachers talking to teachers, we had hoped that each would illustrate what it meant to be a working, creative social historian (whatever his or her academic discipline). We believe that the social history, - or the humanities - is not something, primarily, that one "gets," but something one "does." Our expectation was not, we fear, uniformly realized. Many of the participants seemingly needed more encouragement to react "critically", if necessary less "politely." Some participants seemed to feel that their options were to listen deferentially, or to tune out.

3) The afternoon discussions were sometimes stimulating and

provocative, sometimes desultry, on some occasions, the discussion did so well that the directors' intervention could only have been deleterious. On other occasions it might have helped.

4) Almost certainly one reason some of the discussions did not penetrate beyond the superficial is that real consideration of the humanities is by its nature "risky." Unless discussions remained highly abstract ("we all have different values, right?"), the participants were, like probably any group of only slightly acquainted people, skittish about grappling with such subjects as race, religion, sex roles, downward mobility. One young black woman spoke vigorously, but pretty indiscriminately about the pervasiveness of white racism; the rest of the group sat on their hands, avoiding the kind of discussion her remarks deserved to elicit. One born-again Christain occasionally contradicted the opinions or statements of facts of others on the basis of Bible truths. On each occasion there would be a polite pause, then the discussion resumed as if he hadn't spoken. A number of the teachers spoke quite persuasively about how problematic it would be "get into such matters" in the classroom. No doubt they were right to be apprehensive. Still it is matter of regret to the directors that the Institute did not develop that degree of "comfortableness" with each other that would permit discussion of charged subjects.

5) The directors are inclined to think that the "humanities" might have been better served if the Institute had developed less of a "cell-and-bell" atmosphere. A schedule of 4

to 5 hours a day in the same classroom may be at odds with (at the very least) the intellectually liberating adventure that the study of humanities should be. A less tight schedule might have given participants more time to read and reflect, rather than feel pressed to do their assigned homework so that they would be in a position to recite.

6) A primary, though necessarily latent, purpose of the program was to promote a sense of collegiality - of shared purpose between school and college teachers. One participant's evaluation conveys, accurately we hope and believe, the general reaction. "Excellent organization, content very valuable to high school history teachers. I really appreciate this opportunity to examine issues with scholars without the busy requirements of papers, exams, etc. The focus was great. Dialogue between high school and university instructors makes for continuity and understanding. This has really been great!"

Endnotes

[1] Gross' Minutemen is a carefully-researched, beautifully-written scrutiny of the people of Concord, Mass., before, during, and after the Revolution. It's one of the best of the community studies that have enriched the new social history.

[2] Shopkeeper's Millennium examines what happened in Rochester, N.Y., as it changed into a busy mercantile-industrial center, and also experienced a religious revival.

[3] The Lynds' book was the first, and is still one of the best, attempts by sociologists to describe an American community in terms of the way people earned a living, worshipped, spent their leisure, raised the kids.

[4] Will Herberg, a theologian and a sociologist among other things, provides a controversial interpretation, Protestant-Catholic-Jew, of how three main religious traditions in America have evolved towards what he claimes are largely common commitments.

[5] Mead's book, The Lively Experiment, is a series of essays by America's leading church-historian, who is preoccupied by what is different about religiousness in America, compared, say, to England or France.

[6] Moynihan, a political scientist (and now Senator from New York), and Glazer, a sociologist at Harvard, describe in Beyond the Melting Pot the persistent differences they find among five "ethnic groups" in New York City in the 1960's.

[7] Higham describes how "Americans" looked at "strangers" in the hundred years of mass immigration from Europe to the United States; and shows why sometimes Americans were complacent, and sometimes fearful and hostile.

[8] Blassingame, a prominent black historian at Yale, describes the special character of a slave community.

[9] Nancy Cott's elegant book, Bonds of Womenhood, studies diaries and private letters to find out how New England women in the pre-Civil War period thought about themselves as women.

[10] Wishy, an historian, writes in The Child and the Republic of the way in which the ideological commitments of the new republic affected the way it was believed children should be brought up.

REFERENCE

Report of the Commission on the Humanities. The Humanities in American Life. University of California Press: Berkeley, 1980.