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ABSTRACT

Many contemporary historians contend that the popularity of the social studies as a school subject represents the victory of educators over academicians. This view, however, overlooks the way the controversies over the social studies reflected questions about the nature of intellectual activities. From 1899, the American Historical Association (AHA) urged high schools to offer separate and disciplined history courses to exercise the students' powers of memory, imagination, and judgment. In 1923-24, however, the AHA commissioned a study of teaching that reinforced the idea of a unified social studies integrating such disciplines as history, sociology, political science, and economics. In the first report for this commission, Charles Beard expressed a position that marked his career as a historian. Beard stated that social studies should equip students with the practical knowledge and the ideals to succeed in a changing world. Although some historians felt that Beard's model threatened the ideal of objectivity in historical studies, the College Entrance Examination Board adopted this aim in 1937. Although many historians refuted Beard's call to wider, more open approaches to history, his appeals mirrored what Leon C. Marshall and Rachel Marshall Goetz wanted the elementary and secondary students to acquire as they pursued the social studies. (Contains 20 references.) (BT)

Why Historians Accepted a Unified Social Studies: Charles Beard and the Great Depression.

by

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Why Historians Accepted a Unified Social Studies: Charles Beard and the Great Depression

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The transition of the school subject, history, to the social studies reflected the uneasy relationship that existed in the United States between intellectualism and practical affairs. Yet, historians tend to overlook the complex arguments that were involved in this shift. Instead, they portray the change as the victory of educators over academicians. For example, in a chapter explaining the origins of what he called the shopping mall high school, David Cohen wrote that, by 1930, social studies replaced the traditional courses of history. He complained that one of the effects of this change was that it reduced the academic demands on students as the new courses were designed in ways that permitted all the students to pass (Powell, Farrar, and Cohen 251-252). In a similar manner, Herbert Kliebard described the creation of the social studies in 1916 as the triumph of the social efficiency experts who wanted all school subjects to help people adapt to the social order. Kliebard went on to describe Harold Rugg's effort to create a social studies text that would serve the social reconstructionists as they sought to teach the students to become critical thinkers. However, Kliebard pointed out that Rugg's books went out of print when conservative patriots complained the books were anti American (125-128, 200-208).

Although many scholars offer simple explanations for the continued development of the social studies, the transformation was complex. Many historians, such as Charles Beard, approved of the change. However, more traditional historians complained that the shift altered the goal of professional historical studies. As a result, the controversy paralleled controversies

going on during the 1930s about the nature and purpose of history.

How did members of the American Historical Association think history should be taught?

Concern about programs of secondary education became widespread as the nineteenth century ended. In 1892, the National Education Association appointed the Committee of Ten to investigate the requirements for admission into college from high school. The committee formed ten smaller groups or conferences of experts, each of which had about ten members, assigned to examine specific subjects such as Latin, mathematics, and history (National Education Association 3-7).

In its report of 1893, the Committee of Ten asserted that students who are going on to college should be treated the same as students who would end their education at high school. Thus, according to the committee, every subject taught in a secondary school was to be taught in the same way and to the same extent to all pupils no matter what their future plans may have been because the courses would improve the students' abilities. In this regard, the Committee noted that, when the main recommended subjects were taught consecutively and thoroughly, they would all train the powers of observation, memory, expression, and reasoning. (National Education Association 44-45, 51-52).

It is important to note, for this paper, that the Committee of Ten had considered the aim of such studies as history, civil government, and political economy. The aim of these disciplines was to train the students' judgement, to prepare them for intellectual enjoyment, and to help them, when they were mature, exercise a salutary influence on national affairs. In addition, the Committee of Ten thought that courses in history and civil government gave the students opportunities to use their knowledge of ancient languages.

To describe the proper purpose and methods of teaching history, however, the American

Historical Association (AHA) formed the Committee of Seven. In 1899, this committee had surveyed the practices secondary schools in large cities and small towns. From the 250 replies the committee received, the members found that schools taught the subject differently. The members were pleased to find that many teachers used materials besides textbooks, tried to arouse the students' interests, and sent students to libraries to do independent research. They attributed the use of these practices to the recommendations of the Committee of Ten in 1893. Nonetheless, after comparing the schools in the United States to those in Germany, France, and England, which some members visited, the committee called for more attention to history in secondary schools (Committee of Seven 429-436).

To describe the value of the study, the Committee of Seven pointed out several ways that history helped students. For example, it could show students the steps that human beings took to create civilization. Second, history helped the pupils learn how to think about political and social problems which were similar to those they would confront as adults. Third, the study of history gave the students a broader knowledge and more intelligent spirit that came from a familiarity with people from other times. Fourth, history cultivated judgement by seeking the causes for several effects. In this way, history developed the scientific way of thinking. Finally, according to the report, historical studies enabled the students to acquire library skills (Committee of Seven 437-441).

As a result of the many benefits, the Committee of Seven recommended that some form of history be studied each year from grades seven to twelve. After surveying the courses offered by many schools, the committee recommended four blocks to be studied sequentially. The first was ancient history followed by medieval and modern European history. English history was third and American history was last. The committee recommended that teachers use textbooks

because any other method would lead to confusion. Yet, the report added that the classes might use more than one book and the students could compare accounts. In addition, the report suggested that students use other materials to help them explore events more fully (Committee of Seven 446-447, 475-479).

In 1905, the AHA appointed the Committee of Eight to consider the problems of teaching history in elementary schools. To make its study, the committee sent questionnaires to 250 superintendents around the country and found that most elementary schools gave attention to the teaching of history. To explain the value of teaching history, the committee pointed to the report of the Committee of Seven. Following the conclusions of that earlier committee, the Committee of Eight recommended that history in elementary schools should cover all the events that children could understand and these should be drawn from political, social, industrial, educational, and religious activities (viii- x).

In the main, the Committee of Eight thought that history in the elementary school should concentrate on American history with the aim of explaining the society in which the children lived. This did not mean it had to be contemporary history, however. Writing before the adoption of the junior high schools, the committee recommended that sixth grade students learn those features of ancient and medieval life that contributed to American civilization. Geography had to play a role in such explanations. In the seventh grade, the settlement of the colonies should be considered and, in the eighth, the students would cover the political, industrial, and social growth of the new nation. To keep the interest of the students, the committee recommended that teachers endeavor to make the lessons fit together in story that regularly revealed new developments. To illustrate how this might be done, the committee presented outlines of topics covering those grade levels (x-xvii).

In 1918, the National Education Association's Commission to Reorganize Secondary Education (CRSE) released what is often called the Cardinal Principles Report. The Committee on Social Studies in Secondary Schools was one of sixteen committees that the CRSE asked to evaluate the different subject areas. The aim of each committee was to determine how well its assigned subject met the needs of the students and satisfied the democracy. The Committee on Social Studies, which met from 1913 to 1916, defined the social studies as those subjects whose content related to the organization and development of human society and to people as members of social groups. These included geography, history, economics, political science, and sociology. The aim of the social studies was to cultivate good citizenship. Thus, from their social studies, the students would develop loyalties to their city, their state, and their nation that were tempered by a sense of membership in a world community. These were attributes to be developed by graduates of programs developed by schools that aimed social efficiency (Committee on Social Studies 17).

According to one set of commentators, the Committee of Seven and of Eight were dominated by historians unlike the NEA Committee on Social Studies which in 1916 was dominated by educators. The point these commentators made was that academic scholars were more likely to favor a textbook orientation than were teachers who faced students daily (Barr, Barth, and Shermis 19-25).

However, these commentators overstated the separation between academics and instructors. While the AHA's committees recommended what might be called a textbook approach, they did so because they feared teachers with only modest training could not be left to make up courses. Further, the AHA's committees tried to find ways to make that approach interesting. Finally, the AHA's committees' members were aware of the problems of teaching in

public elementary and secondary schools. Although only one of the members of the Committee of Seven was a teacher, three others had been. On the Committee of Seven, three members were superintendents of schools and two taught in normal schools. Only two members were from colleges.

How did the depression influence historians?

The work of the AHA's committees appeared to be inadequate. In 1923-24, the AHA commissioned a study of the teaching of the social sciences. This report described teachers and administrators faced with increasing numbers of students, confronted by changing social conditions, and confused by the conflicting recommendations of learned committees. Consequently, in 1929, the AHA appointed the Commission on the Social Studies in the Schools. Including a mix of noted historians and prominent educators, this committee reviewed textbooks, courses of study, and books about teaching to prepare a statement of objectives for the courses. In 1932, the AHA published their first report entitled A Charter for the Social Studies. Written by Charles Beard, a famous historian, in consultation with the other commission members, this report reinforced the idea of a unified social studies that integrated such disciplines as history, sociology, political science, and economics (v-xii).

Beard gave three reasons why there should be integrated courses rather than separate or fixed studies of the social sciences. These reasons can be seen as a combination of the earlier ideas of exercising the students' minds and the later concerns with teaching the students to think critically. First, there was constant change in the intellectual disciplines and in the society. Second, in an industrial society, people should learn to think rather than to know certain information. Third, in a democracy, students had to learn to participate intelligently in politics (21-44).

Beard looked for a division of labor in improving social studies. On the one hand, historians and other scholars should devote more attention to the larger aims of their disciplines and the relations among those areas of study. On the other hand, Beard thought that the authors of manuals for schools could draw on such scholarly work to construct reasonable textbooks. However, Beard noted that a serious problem existed among the teachers. Secondary school educators did not engage in active scholarship. As a result, he complained, they were content to adopt the views of the community and distort the social studies (81-92).

For Beard and his commission, the fundamental purpose of the social studies was to help students create rich, many-sided personalities. The social studies should equip the students with the practical knowledge and the ideals necessary to succeed in a changing world. This meant the students should be informed, be aware that the environment as well as individuals can be changed, and be imbued with the highest aspirations of humankind (96-97).

Although Beard wanted the students to recognize the claims of different cultures, he did not advocate multi cultural social studies. Instead of being tolerant, Beard wanted the students to learn to be imaginative and critical because he thought these traits were the forces for social progress. In this regard, he wrote that when students left the schools, they entered a pluralistic world of competing allegiances. The home, the gang, the industry, the business each had its own system of correct behavior. The child must learn about this pluralism and how to cope with it intelligently. Thus, he advocated that teachers discuss these loyalties on a high level of rationality (113-114).

In addition to the Charter for the Social Studies, Beard wrote another book for the commission. Published in 1934, it was entitled, The Nature of the Social Studies in Relation to Objectives of Instruction. This was a more extensive work than the introductory Charter for the

Social Studies since it treated the problems of the social sciences as a whole and the objectives that should be sought to make the content useful in guiding society. In this text, Beard stated the thesis that marked his career in the AHA. This was the view that there can be no science of society because none of the social sciences could be as exact as the natural sciences. At best, Beard argued, social sciences could predict within broad limits what might happen under certain conditions. For example, economists might use historical data to predict what would happen to wages and prices if a country's currency remains inflated.

When Henry Elmer Barnes reviewed Beard's, Nature of the Social Studies, he noted that the commission's series of books aroused controversy among historians. While he believed the books to be important contributions to efforts to reconstruct American society in reasonable ways, he complained that the series did not acknowledge the work that other educators and previous commissions had accomplished. Nonetheless, Barnes praised Beard for recognizing that the social sciences did not offer unlimited value to efforts for social reform because such efforts had to be guided by ethical considerations. According to Barnes, the irony that Beard pointed out was that objectivity in the social sciences was diminished by the same degree to which ethics entered the study of society (97-98).

Most important to this discussion, Beard made the same point to the AHA when he became president. In January 1934, Beard delivered his presidential address, "Written History as an Act of Faith." Quoting Benedetto Croce, he defined history as contemporary thought about the past. This definition repudiated the doctrine held by historians during the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of twentieth century who sought to describe the past as it had happened. This hope had come from conservative historians after the French Revolution who wearied of history as propaganda. As historians recognized the obstacles to objectivity, Beard added, they borrowed

two formulas from natural science. The first was that every event had a cause and if historians could reveal these they would discover the laws of social change. For Beard, Karl Marx illustrated this model. The second was that historians borrowed the images of Darwin and described successions of cultural organisms that rose, grew, competed with other societies, and fell. Oswald Spengler represented this ideal. According to Beard, historians tired of these searches for objectivity, and adopted a formula that made all events relative to time and circumstance. Calling this scheme historical relativity, Beard noted that it could not become absolute because such inquiries served the ideas and interests of some groups during particular times. To avoid the dangers of believing that history was a record of chaos or of treating it as either Marx or Spengler envisioned, Beard urged historians to use the scientific method but, at the same time, to acknowledge the biases implicit in their selections of topics and their treatments of materials (219-229).

Beard's presidential address sparked controversy from members of AHA who called the ideal of objectivity a noble dream that had led its believers to write sound and masterly books. Beard replied to these criticisms with a paper entitled, "That Noble Dream." According to Beard, there were several assumptions in the idea that historians could divorce themselves of their predilections and record the truth. One such assumption was that the historian could know this thing called history. Another was that the historian could view the historical record objectively. A third was that the events of history had some organization which the historian could understand. Unfortunately, Beard added, these assumptions were impossible. For example, historians cannot see the past objectively but must rely on documents which cover only part of the events. Further, the documentation represents only part of the past. In addition, when historians recorded events, they used some ethical considerations and they brought with them the

biases of their own times. Thus, Beard concluded, these limits destroyed the idea of history as objectivity. Consequently, he called for more open meetings among historians where subjects ranged beyond the political histories historians commonly wrote. He urged historians to reach into economic, racial, sexual, and cultural interests. At the same time, he recommended that historians describe the assumptions under which they worked (74-87).

What methods of curriculum planning did historians recommend?

As the controversy among historians proceeded, various members of the AHA's Commission on the Social Studies in the Schools explored alternatives for teaching the social studies. One such idea was to begin the instruction of history with the present and extend to the past. This was an effort to ensure that there was adequate discussion of contemporary issues. However, the ideal of an integrated approach to the study of society came from Leon Marshall, author of several history texts, and his daughter, Rachel Marshall Goetz (Barr, Barth, and Shermis 30).

Marshall and Goetz's text was similar to a text that a social studies educator, Harold Rugg, wrote and published at about the same time. Both texts integrated the social science disciplines. However, Marshall and Goetz's approach was less likely to suffer criticisms from the conservatives who attacked Rugg for being socialistic. Since Rugg structured his texts around issues or problems, critics could easily complain that he portrayed the United States in a poor light. Since Marshall and Goetz organized their approach around what they called the processes of living, they could point out that their text exposed children to ways of living common to all societies. According to Marshall and Goetz, there were five groups of fundamental human activities that made social life comprehensible. These included adjusting to the external world, continuing biologically, guiding human motivation, developing social organization, and directing

cultural improvement. Their text explained each of these and compared the ways people in different societies undertook them (2-11).

By organizing the instruction around five processes of living, Marshall and Goetz believed teachers could build on the students' familiarity with each process. Further, since the processes were universal, the lessons offered an overview of data for social living at all times and in all places. While Marshall and Goetz wanted the students to realize that the physical environment influenced the society or culture that lives in it, they pointed out that change was not always progress. For example, the cultural advances that brought material improvement also led to war. Consequently, they hoped the social studies would teach the children how to direct the culture toward ever better living (11-45).

To explain how such an organization might work, Marshall and Goetz presented explanations of each of the five processes. For example, in adjusting to the external world, the students could learn about the increasing control that people have exercised over the physical environment. This included the ways people made light. Artificial illumination extended from simple fires to lamps of fat and candles to gas jets. Similar stories of fighting famine through food preservation might be explained. In all these cases, the students made certain fundamental observations. One was that the ability to live well depended on changes in the environment. Another was that although such changes should have led to the creation of different types of human beings, they did not. A third observation was that as people found new ways to do things, their culture changed (49-53).

In keeping with their aim of teaching the students to evaluate change, Marshall and Goetz urged the teachers to present the advantages and disadvantages of the choices. This extended into controversial areas. For example, when they considered complicated matters, such as the

development of economic systems, they noted that collective systems such as then in practice in the Soviet Union improved life for many people but caused suffering for others. They noted that capitalistic systems such as found in the United States caused a disproportionate distribution of wealth and, at times, broke down. Yet, they contended that it produced high living standards for many people. In another controversial example, under biological continuance, they considered different forms of family life: monogamy, polygamy, and polyandry. However, the authors did not argue that one view was best. Instead, Marshall and Goetz wanted the students to learn that the mating arrangements were aspects of a culture, and, if those aspects were to be planned, such planning would be complicated (70-71, 109-111).

How did other historians react to the Charter for the Social Studies?

While Marshal and Goetz sought to avoid the problem of indoctrination that historians saw in the social studies, their efforts may not have been enough. In his book, That Noble Dream, Peter Novick described the difficulties that historians faced trying to decide if they could be objective in their work. Novick claimed that the AHA never officially accepted or endorsed its commission's report. He contended that the problem stemmed from the fact that, after World War I, historians looked back on the participation of many of their colleagues in serving the war effort. They complained that, during the war, history writing turned into propaganda to show the rightness of the struggle to subdue Germany. According to Novick, historians worried that within the social studies, they would have to serve as the propaganda department of the government. Not surprisingly, he added, they complained that the commission's report expressed an explicit frame of reference that historians would have to adopt (Novick 190-191).

Despite Novick's account of the controversies, the AHA continued its support of the social studies. In 1934, the AHA assumed responsibility for editing the magazine, The Social

Studies, for teachers of history, social studies, and social sciences which became the journal for the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). In 1937, the AHA and the NCSS established the journal, Social Education, which was to appeal to junior high school and high school teachers. Unlike the American Historical Review, the official journal of the AHA, Social Education carried articles debating the nature of the social studies, evaluating its aims, and describing appropriate methods of instruction.

In its second issue, Social Education described the evolution of the social studies movement. According to the editors, the 1916 report of the Committee on Social Studies represented a rebellion of school people against the requirements imposed by the various committees of the AHA and enforced by the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB). While the 1916 report presented a practical program for junior and senior high schools, the conservative colleges and the CEEB did not recognize the new subjects in the social studies. As a result, in 1934, the CEEB established a Commission on History which presented its report in 1937 (Editor 77-78).

According to Novick, the CEEB commission paid little attention to the social studies and reinforced the teaching of history as a separate subject (191-192). However, Novick's interpretation of the CEEB report seems to be only partially true.

The CEEB commission began its investigation into the study of teaching history by making a survey of the practices being used. The commission sent questionnaires to 250 schools and 75 universities. They found an increasing attention to social studies among all schools even private ones although there was more resistance among prestigious preparatory schools. However, there was no agreement as to what social studies should cover and universities made no consistent requirements concerning what the students should study (CEEB 546-548).

In its definition of history, the CEEB commission made it possible for students to study history in a manner consistent with the social studies. The commission defined "history as the study of man in society from his dim beginnings to the present day" (548). The commission added that the study should be undertaken in as broad a manner as possible. Therefore, the members preferred courses in world civilization over any political, social or cultural history. Most important, according to the report, such a study should enable students to understand the fundamental problems human beings faced in their social evolution.

In one sense, the commission did challenge the social studies movement. The report noted that in high schools there was an emphasis to use history courses as means to prepare students to become good citizens. As a result, although the commission's report agreed that a study in history could not be fully objective, the members did caution against including only those aspects of history that tied to contemporary concerns (CEEB 549).

However, they made two other recommendations that brought courses in history closer to the aim of the social studies. First, to limit the material that the CEEB examination would cover, the commission recommended that teachers concentrate on the history of Europe, Egypt, and the New World. At the same time, they urged that the study of ancient history which concerned Greece and Rome, be reduced although not entirely removed in favor of more contemporary studies. Second, when describing the methods of instructions, the report recommended that teachers present the units of civilization as evolving cultures. Further, to describe the fundamental problems that history courses should discuss, the authors borrowed the framework of social processes that Marshall and Goetz had made in their book, Curriculum Making in the Social Studies (CEEB 550-556).

How did historians and social studies teachers react to the CEEB report?

One member of the CEEB commission, Tyler Kepner, refused to sign the report. In a minority opinion, he complained that the report turned the study of history into courses in sociology. Further, he protested that the method the report recommended, the format suggested by Marshall and Goetz, had been considered for more than twenty years in limited circles without success (CEEB 565-566).

In a subsequent article, Kepner, director of the social studies for Brookline, Massachusetts public schools, described five problems he had noted in the commission's report. First, he disliked the practice of commissions handing down blue prints to teachers. In this case, he claimed that historians were trying to control the social studies curriculum and exclude the other disciplines that should be involved. Second, he thought the members of these commissions ignored the needs of the average pupil in the average classroom. Third, those plans overlooked the fact that many teachers were not trained to teach the curriculums they defined. Fourth, he noted that textbooks were not written in ways that built on those plans. Finally, he contended that the commission drew up its plans without considering whether the citizens in the communities wanted such curriculums (81-87).

The teachers of history at Phillips Exeter Academy endorsed Kepner's objections. They argued that the effort to teach broad courses that confront fundamental problems would force teachers to skim the surface of many events. These teachers argued that such a social processes approach would leave the students with a thin layer of unrelated facts (Teachers 258).

However, Alan Lake Chidsey, headmaster of the Pawling School, complimented the work of the CEEB commission in trying to provide some organization to a field in which different experts expected teachers to follow different directions. He contended that Kepner's complaints were ill founded. For example, Chidsey asserted that there was no difficulty in studying social

problems. He noted that any historical study should be considered as a broad sociological investigation. Second, Chidsey acknowledged that teachers may not be prepared to use the new system and it may ask a great deal of students. However, he did not think that justified remaining in a system that forced students to memorize dates, places, and events (Chidsey 256-257).

The editors of The Social Studies who printed the CEEB report chided the commission for ignoring the 1916 report on the social studies. They complained that the commission was premature in endorsing the social process approach of Marshall and Goetz because teachers were not trained to use it and texts built around it had not been written nor printed. However, they contended that these problems could be resolved in time. In general, therefore, they favored the approach (CEEB 567).

In 1937, the CEEB published a report of another subcommittee for the Commission on History. This was the Subcommittee on the Other Social Studies. This report reinforced the recommendations that broad courses covering the development of civilization should be studied. The subcommittee added that the contribution from studies in economics, government, and sociology was to help understand the problems of contemporary society such as those relating to standards of living and economic security (Subcommittee 262-263).

What was the result of the controversies?

Scholars disagree about the result of these controversies. For example, Novick, whose study of the profession of historians was mentioned above, contended that history did not disappear from high school curriculums. He attributed the staying power of history as a school subject to three factors. First, school people failed to form a coherent program of the social studies. Second, school boards distrusted the progressive ideals found in the social studies. Third, the older ways of teaching were difficult to remove (192). However, Kliebard, who was quoted at

the beginning of this paper, pointed out that although many high schools retained courses that were named history, those classes were organized along the lines of the social studies (125).

Between these two interpretations, Kliebard's may be the more accurate. However, it overlooks the ways that historians changed their own profession and moved it in a direction more like that found in the social studies. Although many historians refuted Beard's call to wider, more open approaches to history, his appeals mirrored the general mind set that Marshall and Goetz wanted the elementary and secondary students to acquire as they pursued the social studies. In that way, the controversies over the social studies reflected questions about the nature of intellectual activities more than they represented struggles for the control of the curriculum.

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