

## HAROLD O. RUGG AND THE FOUNDATION OF SOCIAL STUDIES

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Most educational historians and social education theorists such as Herbert Kliebard, have determined that social studies originated out of the 1916 National Education Association (NEA) Committee on Social Studies, chaired by Thomas Jesse Jones.<sup>1</sup> David Saxe and other scholars have suggested that Arthur William Dunn was the originator of social studies because Dunn developed “Community Civics,” thereby making him the first person to utilize a social approach to civic education. Dunn’s early work in social studies predates the 1916 NEA Committee on Social Studies by eleven years.<sup>2</sup>

Debates on the origins of social studies will continue, however, no one has ever attempted to pinpoint the moment that the social studies became a viable part of the school curriculum. As a historian, I posit that this occurred with the development and implementation of the Rugg Social Studies Curriculum. If anyone can be credited with taking the quantum leap from a historically, single-discipline approach to a pluralistic, social studies approach, that person would be Harold Ordway Rugg, a professor of education at Columbia University’s Teachers College. In 1923, Rugg proposed that social studies should be one unified course in social science and not separate courses.<sup>3</sup> He was one of the few educational theorists of his day who attempted to define the discipline of social studies as the science of society.

In 1930, Rugg and his associates published *History of American Civilization: Economic and Social* followed in 1931 by *A History of American Government and Culture*. By examining the preface of these two works, one is able to gain insight into the philosophic basis of the textbook series.<sup>4</sup> These two volumes represented a complete and unified history of the United States. The former was a cultural and geographic survey of American history, while the latter was a cultural and governmental history of the nation. The rationale for the texts was to help the students comprehend the major modes of living in their country.<sup>5</sup> Rugg envisioned that his curriculum would allow young Americans to focus on the “American Problem.” Rugg identified the American Problem as follows: How could the United States develop a society of abundance, adhere to democratic principles, appreciate the integrity of expression, and develop the potential available for tomorrow?<sup>6</sup>

Students would investigate the American Problem by examining the difficulties confronted in the various modes of living presented in their historical perspective. Rugg included activities in a pupil’s workbook to stimulate thought on the American Problem. Students used the reading books and workbooks together to facilitate thought provoking activities.<sup>7</sup>

Rugg stated that his whole program introduced the students to the historical development of world civilization.<sup>8</sup> He outlined his curriculum as follows:

Volume 1: *An Introduction to American Civilization*—the study of the economic life in the United States.

Volume 2: *Changing Civilizations in the Modern World*—introduces the student to life in other lands. The text considers industrialized countries and agricultural countries and the interaction between the two.

Volumes 3 and 4: These two texts already mentioned present the historical development of the

United States in its geographic setting.

Volume 5: *An Introduction to the Problems of American Culture*—considers the life of the individual in the communities of our changing American civilization.

Volume 6: *Changing Governments and Changing Cultures*—discusses the life of the individual in other cultures.<sup>9</sup>

Rugg expressed that the six texts taken together represented an attempt to present a comprehensive introduction to the process of living in the contemporary social milieu. He maintained that it was important for students to learn social studies in this way in order to develop an understanding of modern technological civilization and its accompanying social problems.<sup>10</sup>

The philosophical purpose of the textbook series was to incorporate into the curriculum a social studies course that would be acceptable to both the teacher and student. Since both were comfortable with a historical approach, it was utilized to develop a unified social science course. Rugg stated:

Whenever history is needed to understand the present, history is presented. If geographic relationships are needed to throw light upon contemporary problems, those relationships are incorporated. The same thing has been done with the economic and social facts and principles.<sup>11</sup>

It was his contention that a unified social studies course was better than the separate subjects of history, geography, economics, and civics, because it wouldn't lessen the amount of material but add to it. In other words, his program would look at the problems of modern society from a social science perspective rather than a discipline model.<sup>12</sup>

This paradigm of social studies led Rugg and his research team to find and utilize the works of "Frontier Thinkers." These scholars included such notable people as Charles Beard, Thorstein Veblen, James Harvey Robinson, Harold Laski, John Dewey, and others. Rugg incorporated the latest scholarship from these intellectuals into his textbooks.<sup>13</sup> One doctoral student, Neal Billings, developed 888 generalizations from the works of key thinkers of the day which were incorporated into the series of books.<sup>14</sup> This total appropriation of ideas from all the social sciences caused Edgar Bruce Wesley, considered the author of the first social studies methods book, to evaluate Rugg's legacy to the field of education: "I would say he was the great integrator in the field of education, particularly in the social studies. Others used the term before but didn't really understand it. Rugg was the first to really grasp the meaning of the social studies."<sup>15</sup>

Accordingly, it could be suggested that Rugg and his associates developed the first course in social studies. The essence of the unified social science course of study was a succession of activities which were dynamic and thought stimulating. Each problem was organized around a scheme of activities. Each unit required the students to answer a series of questions pertaining to social issues. The key to the system was the pupils' workbooks, which documented their thought processes and guided their discussions.<sup>16</sup>

The elaborate preparations for the development of the whole program are worth investigating. According to Rugg, hundreds of schools across the country cooperated in the construction of the social science program from 1922 to 1929. The curriculum was based on a considerable amount of research which included:

Thirteen studies on what to teach of the problems of contemporary life, of the chief trends of civilization, and the central concepts and principles which educated minds use in thinking about them.

Three scientific studies of grade placement of curriculum materials and of the development of pupils' abilities.

Six studies of learning and of the organization of curriculum materials, which have also contributed to the arrangement of material in the course.<sup>17</sup>

Rugg held that social studies should be the intellectual core of the curriculum and each class should be longer than sixty minutes.<sup>18</sup> If the students were going to address the problems of society, they needed

to have time to contemplate, therefore the conventional time restraints in the school day would have to be modified.

Since thinking was an important part of the curriculum Rugg consulted the “Frontier Thinkers” on the subject of John Dewey. Rugg used Dewey’s book *How We Think* and added his own thoughts based on his research in the field of learning theory to develop teaching suggestions for problem-solving.<sup>19</sup> In fact, Rugg based his entire curriculum on the latest psychological principals of the day. After careful investigation over the previous three decades, Rugg concluded that good teaching in social studies should be based on the following principles:

1. The pupil learns only by active assimilation.
2. The situations of the school must be real and dramatic.
3. Learning proceeds through the gradual accumulation of experience.
4. Every avenue of learning should be employed.
5. Maximum growth in understanding.
6. Systematic and economical practice on skills.
7. Learning develops simultaneously.
8. The intensive study of a few things.
9. Attention centered on one thing at a time.
10. Courses should be organized upon “Understandable Units.”<sup>20</sup>

It is apparent that the Rugg curriculum was well-planned and scientifically constructed based on the latest research in all the fields of social science and education.

Francis FitzGerald, well-noted American history textbook reviewer, evaluated the Rugg series as follows:

In one volume, *An Introduction to the Problems of American Culture*, he [Rugg] discussed unemployment, the problems faced by immigrants, class structure, consumerism and the speedup of life in an industrial society. These questions had never been dealt with extensively in any school text, and the frankness of his approach remains startling even today.<sup>21</sup>

Some educational scholars contend that no other social studies curriculum or textbook series since the Rugg project has been based on such considerable, complete research and dealt with such relevant contemporary issues. According to the historian Merle Curti, Rugg illustrated in his textbooks that lessons could be taught in such a way as to have the student critically assess the establishment and at the same time appreciate some of its achievements.<sup>22</sup> Rugg’s program came under attack in the early 1940s by the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) because he was critical of advertising.<sup>23</sup> The NAM objected to a chapter in *An Introduction to the Problems of American Culture*, which focused on advertising. The offending remarks were under the subtitle: “Advertising has brought Abuses.” This section considered the improper use of “testimonials” and the widespread misrepresentation of goods.<sup>24</sup> The text went on to question the relationship between price and quantity, therefore disputing the fundamental economic axiom of supply and demand; a question which the NAM thought was un-American.<sup>25</sup>

H.W. Prentis, president of NAM, in a speech to leaders of the oil industry suggested that “creeping socialism” had invaded the schools by means of social studies books that questioned students’ beliefs in the capitalist system. The NAM hired Columbia banking professor Ralph Robey to assess the textbooks in the schools. Robey charged that the textbooks, especially the Rugg materials, were too critical of free enterprise. This led to the censorship and ban of all textbooks. While in 1938 the Rugg texts sold 300,000 copies, by 1944 sales had dropped to 21,000.<sup>26</sup>

Later social studies educational theorists such as Allan Griffin, Shirley Engle, Anna Ochoa, and Edwin Fenton advocated social studies models similar to Rugg’s, all with an emphasis on making students think. The textbook controversy, however, calls into question the basic issue of social education.

If one of the purposes of social studies is citizenship education, then what makes a good citizen? Is a good citizen, one who is obedient and dutiful such as the socially efficient citizen envisioned by the 1916

NEA Committee on Social Studies, led by Thomas Jesse Jones? Is a good citizen one who can be intellectually independent and considers each issue on its own merits without regard for cultural bias or political indoctrination? Rugg would have said that a good citizen was one who could critique the status quo in an intellectually unbiased manner. He saw the problems of society and concluded that we were on the cusp of either a new dark age or a new renaissance. This new flowering would only come about by equipping our youth with the requisite knowledge to deal with change. Education would lead the human race to this new utopia of learning.

In 1941, Rugg summed up his thoughts in the book *That Men May Understand* as follows:

We stand indeed at the crossroads of a new epoch: In various directions lie diverse pathways to tomorrow. Some lead to social chaos and the possible destruction of interdependent ways of living. One leads, however, to the era of the Great Society. There is no way to short-circuit the building of this new epoch. There is only the way of education, and its great purpose is that men may understand.<sup>27</sup>

Rugg was concerned with the values in the educational institutions of the country. He attempted to show the link between the subject matter and society. Fast-paced change was creating a dislocated culture. Social criticism was the overriding philosophy of all of Rugg's work. According to John B. McNeil, a curriculum professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, Rugg wanted students to use the emerging concepts from the social sciences and aesthetics to recognize and resolve contemporary cultural problems.<sup>28</sup>

Rugg's books weren't Marxist. Marx wanted to destroy the division of labor he found in capitalism as evident in his paradigm of the "withering away of the state." The absence of any state is an anarchical situation. Without the government, there could be no laboring class or upper class, only citizens of equal conditions. Rugg wasn't an anarchist or orthodox Marxist. He never recommended, suggested, or implied that he wished the government of the United States to be overthrown. His books advocated student critique of the establishment and at the same time fostered an appreciation of the existing social order's achievements. They were liberal because of the stress on understanding and social justice. They were Keynesian in nature because of the need for some economic game plan to deal with the depression.

The Rugg curriculum was an expression of progressive education in textbook writing and curriculum design. In his approach or philosophy, Rugg was always cognizant of the problems in contemporary society and attempted to have education deal with the changes those problems wrought. By developing a problem-centered multidisciplinary social sciences approach, Rugg wasn't only the first real social studies educator, but also the precursor of the "New Social Studies" envisioned in the 1960s by Jerome Bruner and others. It is ironic, however, that the curriculum developed by Bruner, *MACOS—Man a Course of Study*, met with the same criticism and demise as the Rugg materials.

## NOTES

1. Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the Curriculum: 1893-1958* (New York: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1981), 125-27.

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3. Harold Rugg, *National Society for the Study of Education: Twenty-Sixth Yearbook* (New York: National Society for the Study of Education, 1923), 297-98.

4. Harold Rugg, *A History of American Civilization: Economic and Social* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1930), v-xiii; Harold Rugg, *A History of American Government and Culture* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1931), v-xiii.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Murry R. Nelson, "Rugg on Rugg: His Theories and His Curriculum," *Curriculum Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (Summer 1978): 123.

7. Rugg, see note 4.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., vii.
12. Ibid.
13. Kliebard, 203.
14. Murry R. Nelson, "Building a Science of Society: the Social Studies and Harold O. Rugg," (PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 1975), 7.
15. Ibid., 1.
16. Harold Rugg, *A History of American Civilization*, viii: see note 4.
17. Ibid., x.
18. Ibid., xi
19. Harold Rugg and William Withers, *Social Foundations of Education* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1955), 705-708.
20. Harold Rugg and James E. Mendenhall, *Teacher's Guide for An Introduction to American Civilization* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1929), 3-13 passim.
21. Frances FitzGerald, *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 36-37.
22. Merle Curti, *The Social Ideas of American Educators* (Paterson, N.J.: Pageant Books , 1959), 557.
23. FitzGerald, 108-109.
24. Harold Rugg, *An Introduction to the Problems of American Culture* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1931), 462-65.
25. Ibid., 465-67.
26. Daniel Schugurensky, "Textbooks, Business Pressures and Censorship: Harold Rugg and the Robey Investigation," [online] (cited February 2003); available from <http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~dschugurensky/assignment171938rugg.html>.
27. Harold Rugg, *That Men May Understand* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1941), 349-50.
28. John D. McNeil, *Curriculum: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1990), 29.