

Social Studies and the Social Order: Transmission or Transformation?

William B. Stanley

Should social studies educators transmit or transform the social order? By “transform” I do not mean the common view that education should make society better (e.g., lead to scientific breakthroughs, eradicate disease, and increase productivity). Rather, I am referring to approaches to education that are critical of the dominant social order and motivated by a desire to ensure both political and economic democracy. This progressive or radical (depending on one’s point of view) view of education for social transformation crystallized in the 1920s and ’30s and remains a persistent school of thought. However, the impact of a focus on social transformation on educational policy and practice has been marginal.

Given our cultural commitment in the United States to individualism and free market theory, the limited impact of education for social transformation should not be surprising. Schooling has functioned, in general, to transmit the dominant social order, preserving the status quo, and it would be more plausible to argue that the current economic and political systems would need to undergo radical change before fundamental change in education could take place. Still, the question remains, What should be the role of teachers, especially social studies teachers, with respect to the social order—transmission or transformation?

The Quest for Democracy

Debates over education reform take place within a powerful historical and cultural context. In the United States, schooling is generally understood as an integral component of a democratic society. To the extent we *are* a democratic society, one could argue that education for social transformation could be anti-democratic, a view held by many conservatives. From the left side of the political spectrum, however, the view is that our nation is not now (nor ever was) a fully democratic society. In addition to a history of ethnic, racial, and gender discrimination, the gap between the wealthy and lower classes continues to increase; meanwhile, a significant percent of Americans still live in poverty. Most people have little or no influence on corporate or government institutions and policy, which are largely controlled by dominant groups who support a system that serves their own interests. If one accepts this line of thinking, education for social transformation becomes a moral imperative in the service of democracy.

But the either/or conception of education described above tends to oversimplify and distort. There is a more productive way of looking at this issue. Democratic societies have been rare throughout history, only expanding significantly over the last two centuries. Democratic thought and action (citizenship) must be learned,

“Research & Practice,” established early in 2001, features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers. Here, I invited William Stanley to bring a historical perspective to the perennial question, “Should social studies teachers work to transmit the status quo or to transform it?”

—Walter C. Parker, “Research and Practice” Editor, University of Washington, Seattle.

and schools are places where children receive formal training as citizens. Democracy is also a process or form of life rather than a fixed end in itself, and we should regard any democratic society as a work in progress.¹ Thus, democratic society is something we are always trying simultaneously to maintain *and* reconstruct, and education is essential to this process.

When one looks at the question of education for social transformation in the context of American history, three prevailing perspectives emerge. First, a strong form of education for social transformation was developed by George Counts in the 1930s and remains part of more recent work by various proponents of “critical pedagogy” and counter-socialization.² A second, and frequently misunderstood, perspective is found in John Dewey’s curriculum theory, which rejected Counts’s core argument. The influence of Dewey’s pragmatic approach to education is also found in the work of more recent curriculum theorists such as Cleo Cherryholmes and Tony Whitson.³ A third view, opposed to education for social transformation, is found in the work of various conservative writers, most recently George Posner, a federal appellate judge, and social studies educator James Leming. Posner’s views have roots in the earlier work of Walter Lippmann, one of Dewey’s intellectual colleagues in the

1920s and 30s. I will summarize briefly each of the three perspectives and then conclude with my thoughts on how this issue remains relevant to social studies education.⁴

George Counts's Reconstructionist Challenge to Teachers

In 1932, Counts called on teachers to “build a new social order.” It remains the most explicit argument for education for social transformation or what he called social “reconstruction.”⁵ Counts believed the Depression in the

of clearly defined purpose.⁷ The progressive education movement's failure to develop such a purpose, a theory of social welfare, “unless it be that of anarchy or extreme individualism,” was its core weakness.⁸ Progressive educators seemed incapable of responding to the great crises of the 1930s. Members largely of the middle class, progressives were too fond of their material possessions and tended to “follow the lead of the most powerful and respectable forces in society and at the same time find good reasons for doing so.”⁹

Progressive educators must free themselves from philosophic relativism and the undesirable influences of an upper middle class culture to permit the development of “a realistic and comprehensive theory of social welfare” and “a compelling and challenging vision of human destiny.”¹⁰ In addition, progressives must come to accept “that all education contains a large element of imposition, that in the very nature of the case this is inevitable, that the existence and evolution of society depend upon it, that it is consequently eminently desirable, and that the frank acceptance of this fact by the educator is a major professional obligation.”¹¹

Counts's curriculum for social transformation was designed to expose the antidemocratic limitations of individualism and free market economic theory, promote a strong form of participatory democracy, and create an economic system that reduces disparities of income, wealth, and power.

Dewey's Critique of Social Reconstructionism

Dewey, like Counts, understood that education must have a social orientation. The question, Dewey wrote, “Is not whether the schools shall or shall not influence the course of future social life, but in what direction they shall do so and how.”¹² The way our schools actually “share in the building of the social order of the future depends on the particular social forces and movements with which they ally.”¹³ According to Dewey, education “must

... assume an increasing responsibility for participation in projecting ideas of social change and taking part in their execution in order to be educative,” with particular attention to a more just, open, and democratic society.¹⁴ Consequently, teachers cannot escape the responsibility for assisting in the task of social change or maintenance.

Considering such sentiments, it is not surprising that many scholars mistakenly have described Dewey as a social reconstructionist.¹⁵ Dewey did believe that the schools should assist



(AP Photo/staff)

John Dewey

in the reconstruction of society, but his view of this process differed significantly from Counts's. Rather than indoctrinating students with a particular theory of social welfare, Dewey believed the schools should participate in the general intellectualization of society by inculcating a “method of intelligence.” This would provide students with the critical competence for reflective thought applied to the analysis of social problems.¹⁶ Education's central aim is “to prepare individuals to take part intelligently in the management of conditions under which they will live, to bring them to an understanding of the forces which are moving, and to equip them with the intellectual and practical tools by which they can themselves enter into the

Courtesy of Teachers College, Columbia University.



George Counts

1930s confirmed that America was in a state of crisis and required a new social order based upon democratic social justice and a fundamental redistribution of economic and political power. Since political and economic power was held largely by powerful elite groups, the realization of a truly democratic social order could not happen unless the capitalist economy of the United States was eliminated “or changed so radically in form and spirit that its identity will be completely lost.”⁶

The progressive education movement was in full swing at the time. While Counts acknowledged progressive education's positive focus on the interests of the child, “progress” implied moving forward and this, he wrote, “can have little meaning in the absence

direction of these forces.”¹⁷ Over time, students would acquire the knowledge and skills that would enable them “to take part in the great work of construction and organization that will have to be done, and to equip them with the attitudes and habits of action that will make their understanding and insight practically effective.”¹⁸

To grasp the difference between Counts’s and Dewey’s stands on our question, it is important to understand that Dewey was committed to an educational *method*, not to any specific social outcome as a result of employing that method. He explicitly rejected Counts’s position that the schools should indoctrinate students in order to promote a particular theory of social welfare. It was up to well-educated democratic citizens to clarify and determine preferred social ends. To attempt to use education to impose a particular social order would be to abandon the method of intelligence and replace it with indoctrination.¹⁹ However, while Dewey’s curriculum theory was not based on a particular theory of social welfare, it did emphasize the centrality of providing the conditions under which the method of intelligence could be applied, and critics exaggerate when they claim Dewey’s pragmatic theory had no political implications.²⁰

Counts attacked Dewey’s educational approach for being neutral. But Dewey did not believe it was neutral, nor was it mechanical, aloof, or “purely intellectual.” The pragmatists’ application of modern advances in science and technology to improve society took place not through indoctrination but by the “intelligent study of historical and existing forces and conditions ...” and this method “cannot fail ... to support a new general social orientation.”²¹ In this sense, indoctrination was unnecessary, because the application of the method of intelligence would eventually reveal ways to improve the social order.

Those supporting indoctrination rest their adherence to the theory, in part, upon the fact that there is

a great deal of indoctrination now going on in the schools, especially with reference to narrow nationalism under the name of patriotism, and with reference to the dominant economic regime. These facts unfortunately *are* facts. But they do not prove that the right course is to seize upon the method of indoctrination and reverse its object.²²

Dewey did recommend that educators *impose* the pragmatic method of intelligence, but he did not see this recommendation as contradictory. “If the method we have recommended leads teachers and students to better conclusions than those which we have reached—as it surely will if widely and honestly adopted—so much the better.”²³ In contrast, any attempt to inculcate a preconceived theory of social welfare would ultimately work to subvert the method of intelligence and was antithetical to education for democracy.

The Conservative Critique of Education for Social Transformation

The conservative critique of Counts’s reconstructionism and Dewey’s progressivism is rooted in three interrelated intellectual traditions: democratic realism, individualism, and free market theory. Democratic realism, which emerged in the early twentieth century, concluded that most voters behaved irrationally, were motivated by narrow self-interests, and lacked adequate knowledge and competence to participate in meaningful deliberation regarding public policy. The most influential democratic realist in the 1920s and ’30s was Walter Lippmann, a prominent journalist (and former socialist and progressive intellectual).

Lippmann argued that industrialization and urbanization had transformed fundamentally the widespread network of small communities that had provided the context for democratic life throughout the first century of our national history. Loss of local community undermined the capacity

of individuals to acquire directly the knowledge to determine their interests and make informed public policy decisions. The exponential expansion of social and scientific knowledge and the increasing complexity of modern society only worsened the masses’ inability to comprehend social issues.²⁴

According to Lippmann, only an enlightened elite (disinterested experts), not the masses, could understand the social science knowledge required to make complex public policy decisions in the public interest. The average person had neither the time nor interest to acquire the knowledge necessary for



Walter Lippmann

participating in this way. In addition, the increasingly sophisticated use of mass media and propaganda by government and business had resulted in the “manufacture” of public opinion, thereby laying waste to the liberal democratic assumption that public consent arose from the collective actions of informed citizens. Lippmann’s critique of liberal democracy intensified over time, and he came to doubt even the capacity of elites themselves to acquire the knowledge adequate to resolve the increasingly complex policy problems.²⁵

Dewey was impressed by Lippmann’s analysis of social and political conditions in the 1920s, but he rejected his anti-democratic recommendations.²⁶ Regrettably, Dewey never adequately addressed the

devastating criticisms Lippmann raised regarding the core assumptions of liberal democracy.²⁷

More recently, Richard Posner (while never citing Lippmann) reintroduced democratic realism in the context of America's postindustrial society.²⁸ Posner makes a case for the current U.S. political system, which he describes as functioning much like a free market economy. Like Lippmann, Posner considers modern society far too complex for the mass of humanity to understand in any depth. Even elite technocratic groups never have a full understanding of social issues. Nevertheless, the current American political system does provide a workable structure wherein highly complex technical information is sorted out and politicians sell their candidacy to voters much as entrepreneurs sell products or services. The masses' key role is voting in free elections. These elections build public confidence, legitimate public policy, and ensure that politicians compete for public support. While the average person is unlikely to have the competence to make complex policy decisions, he or she is qualified to determine, over time, if elected officials are acting in the public interest. That's not a strong democracy, but it is, realistically, all that we can manage.

Following the logic of Posner's argument, education for either Counts's social reconstruction or Dewey's method of intelligence would be a bad idea. The former requires citizens to attain an unattainable level of knowledge (the correct theory of social welfare), and the latter aims for an illusory and unworkable conception of participatory democracy. Posner considers Dewey's conception of deliberative democracy as a quixotic and even counterproductive approach to governing modern societies. Instead, schools should help students understand how our current democracy actually works, how it might be improved, and why it is the preferred political system.

In a related development, social studies educator James Leming recently made a case for abandoning what he sees as a progressive emphasis on



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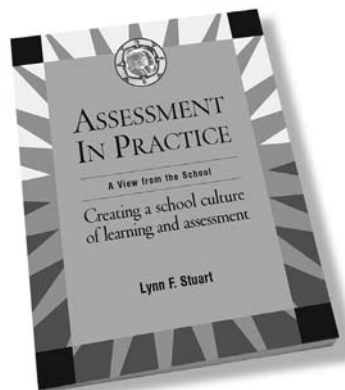
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citizenship education for critical analysis of social problems and social transformation.²⁹ Leming has tried to demonstrate that the progressive view of education is anti-democratic because it is substantially at odds with the majority of social studies educators and the general public.

Rather like Lippmann and Posner, Leming also contends that critical analysis of social problems is beyond the cognitive capacity of the vast majority of K-12 students. Knowledge of history and the social sciences should be the bedrock of social studies education, he believes. Like E.D. Hirsch, Jr., Leming sees the acquisition of basic core knowledge (“cultural literacy”) as fundamental to any successful education program.³⁰ He does not rule out a limited focus on critical thinking, but social educators need to avoid asking students to engage in thinking activities “beyond their abilities...”³¹ In his view, most progressive approaches to education are actually thinly disguised liberal or Left political agendas for radical social transformation.

Conclusion

Dare social studies educators try to build a new social order? I have presented three perspectives on this question, and the debates over the answer continue today.

Counts was right to claim that education couldn't be neutral. Every teacher, whether consciously or not, is working in some relation to the dominant social order. Furthermore, the arguments in favor of education for social transformation continue to direct our attention to persistent social problems (e.g., poverty, discrimination, inequality, and the concentration of power in the hands of dominant groups). As Dewey made clear, however, Counts advocated an approach to education based on indoctrination, an approach inherently antithetical to democratic education.

In contrast, the conservative position offers a strong case against both education for social transformation and Dewey's progressive approach to citizenship education. Lippmann, Posner, and others offer a cogent critique of Dewey's

vision of participatory democracy, and recent research on public opinion and participation in elections continues to support democratic realism's claims.³²

Still, the failure to implement participatory democracy is not equivalent to a compelling argument to abandon the project. Our nation is rooted in the belief that participatory democracy is possible. Like many other ideals, participatory democracy might remain more a social orientation than a description of practice. Nevertheless, to abandon the ideal might itself work to block the growth and eventual implementation of democratic institutions and practice.

Dewey's approach to social education remains a helpful middle course. While Dewey was never able to counter adequately the democratic realist arguments, he did justify our continued faith in participatory democracy, the method of intelligence, and the need to reject indoctrination. To do otherwise is to claim we know for certain the limits of human potential, a view antithetical to democratic culture.

I have presented one possible interpretation of the “transmission or transformation” question. Of course, others might draw different conclusions. I hope to have demonstrated why the issue is important and to have provided social educators today with three historic positions on it. Perhaps this will be helpful to them as they develop their own responses. 🌐

Notes

1. Walter C. Parker, *Teaching Democracy: Unity and Diversity in Public Life* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003).
2. Henry A. Giroux, *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life: Critical Pedagogy in the Modern Age* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988), and *Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning*, rev. ed. (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1988). Shirley H. Engle and Anna S. Ochoa, *Education for Democratic Citizenship: Decision Making in the Social Studies* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988).
3. Cleo H. Cherryholmes, *Reading Pragmatism* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999). James Anthony Whitson, *Constitution and Curriculum* (London: Falmer, 1991). William B. Stanley, *Curriculum for Utopia: Social Reconstructionism and Critical Pedagogy in the Postmodern Era* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992).
4. The three positions are simplifications for purposes of illustrating three fundamentally different responses to the transmission-transformation question.

5. George S. Counts, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* (New York: John Day, 1932), 48.
6. *Ibid.*, 47.
7. *Ibid.*, 6.
8. *Ibid.*, 7.
9. *Ibid.*, 8.
10. *Ibid.*, 9.
11. *Ibid.*, 12.
12. John Dewey, “Education and Social Change,” *The Social Frontier* 3, no. 26 (1937): 236.
13. Dewey, “Can Education Share in the Social Reconstruction,” *The Social Frontier* 1, no. 1 (1934): 11.
14. Dewey and John L. Childs, “The Social-Economic Situation and Education,” in *Educational Frontier*, edited by William H. Kilpatrick (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1933), 318-319.
15. See Giroux, *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life and Teachers as Intellectuals*; also Ronald W. Evans, *The Social Studies Wars: What Should We Teach the Children* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004).
16. Dewey, “The Need for Orientation,” *Forum* 93, no. 6 (1935): 334.
17. Dewey and Childs, “The Social-Economic Situation and Education,” 71.
18. Dewey, “Education and Social Change,” 236.
19. Dewey “Education and Social Change.”
20. See Richard Posner, *Law, Pragmatism, and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) and John Patrick Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 8.
21. Dewey, “The Crucial Role of Intelligence,” *The Social Frontier* 1, no. 5 (1935): 9.
22. Dewey, “Education and Social Change,” 238.
23. Dewey and Childs, “The Socio-Economic Situation in Education,” 72.
24. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1922).
25. Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New York: Macmillan, 1925).
26. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Chicago: Swallow, 1927).
27. Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 300-318.
28. Posner, *Law, Pragmatism, and Democracy*.
29. James S. Leming, L. Ellington, and K. Porter, eds., *Where Did the Social Studies Go Wrong?* (Dayton, Ohio: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 2003). Leming, “Correct, But Not Politically Correct? A Response to Parker,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 20, no. 4 (1992): 500-506.
30. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Vintage, 1987).
31. Leming, Ellington, and Porter, eds., *Where Did the Social Studies Go Wrong?*, 134.
32. Louis Menand, “The Unpolitical Animal,” *The New Yorker*, September 20, 2004.

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