

Schism in the Schoolhouse: The Tenuous Relationship between Social Scientists and Educationists within the AHA Commission on the Social Studies (1929-1934)

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Abstract

From 1929 to 1934, the American Historical Association (AHA) led a commission of prominent scholars from the fields of education and the social sciences with the charge of comprehensively investigating the social studies in American schools. This paper investigates the relationship between the educationists and social scientists within the Commission and discusses likely causes for the differences between the two camps.

Introduction

In 1929, the American Historical Association (AHA) formed a commission to comprehensively investigate the social studies in American schools. The Commission was a collaboration of prominent leaders in both the social sciences and education, including historians Charles Beard and A.C. Krey, the educational theorist, George Counts, and curricularist Ernest Horn. Receiving a five-year grant from the Carnegie foundation, the Commission commenced in 1929 and remained an active body until 1935. This collaboration resulted in the production of sixteen different volumes with many of them published well into the late 1930s. However, the Commission's work became embroiled in controversy, surrounding its final summary volume: *Conclusions and Recommendations* (Commission on the Social Studies, 1934), written by Krey, the Commission's chair, Beard, and Counts. A close reading of the Commission's work finds that the controversy sprouted from a myriad of issues, including radicalism, but mostly testing.

However, the controversy about the Commission's work also revealed a schism that resided within the body of the Commission's membership. This schism revolved around the perception that the social scientists and educationists had of one another's professional ranking and emerged within the deliberations of the high profile members of the AHA Commission on the Social Studies.

Origins of the AHA Commission

The purpose of the AHA Commission on the Social Studies was to streamline social studies education at a time when the high school curriculum was undergoing a massive curricular revision so as to meet the needs of a school population that had grown exponentially in the first two decades of the twentieth century (Kliebard 2002, 45). The American Historical Association (AHA), a premier professional organization for historians and history educators alike, found itself mired in the middle of this process of these curricular revisions. In 1899, the AHA proposed a sequence of history courses for the high school experience which provided the underlying message that history alone prepared students for the "duties of daily life and intelligent citizenship" (Jenness 1990, 67-71). This history centered curricula was later contested by the National Education Association Committee on the Social Studies (NEACSS) of 1916 that proposed a high school curriculum that placed history into a broader field, called 'social studies', whose "subject matter relates directly to the organization and development of human society, and to man as a member of social groups" with a

“conscious and constant purpose” aimed toward “the cultivation of good citizenship”(Nelson 1994, 9). In 1918, the NEA’s Cardinal Principles Report of Secondary Education concurred with the NEACSS by proposing “citizenship” as one of the primary principles the high school experience should revolve around. These two curricular reforms by the NEA revolutionized the entire secondary curriculum from one with an academic bent to one with an emphasis on the nature of the student population and the general aims of society instead of the exclusive subject-centered history curriculum that had been previously proposed by the AHA. Historians read between the lines of the newer curricular reports and saw history being marginalized in the public schools by this new found emphasis on citizenship education (Jenness 1990, 78; Novick 1988, 186-7). Subsequently, the AHA reported in 1924 that the social studies was in a sense of chaos since social studies teachers did not follow any pattern, which may lead toward curricular organizations to work at cross purposes in future reforms (American Historical Association 1924, 84; Beard 1932, vii; Jenness 1990, 102; Watras 2003, 48). It is as result of the conclusions of this 1924 report that the AHA formed a planning committee that eventually gave birth to the AHA Commission on the Social Studies. In the winter of 1928, the Carnegie Corporation announced that it would fund a five year study of the social studies conducted by the AHA (Beard 1932, viii-ix). The Commission aimed to be a comprehensive study of social studies that merged notable historians and social scientists with educationists. The Commission commenced in 1929 and “was to be the most elaborate and comprehensive commission in the history of the social studies” (Hertzberg 1981, 44). It was also the site where academic tribes, one from the arts and sciences, and the other from

education, clashed in how they viewed the future of teacher training in the United States.

The Triumvirate

The AHA Commission counted among its members some of the most prominent historians and social scientists in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s. There were sixteen members total on the Commission, each of whom derived from various fields related with social studies education: historians, social scientists, educationists, and school practitioners. The Commission was led by A.C. Krey, a medievalist historian from The University of Minnesota. Appointed by the AHA in the winter of 1924, Krey was required to organize the Commission, including compiling its members, as well as ensure that it was successful in this first comprehensive examination of the social studies in the schools. As a result, Krey’s burdensome work between the years of his appointment to the end of the Commission’s appointment consisted of writing “reports, letters, and requests for funding, kept books, cajoled, persuaded, and smoothed ruffled feathers” (Dennis 1990, 25). While a notable historian in his own right, Krey cajoled Charles Beard, arguably the most prominent American historian at the time, toward membership on the Commission. Beard’s scholarship was so well received at the time that the AHA Commission was referred to some as the “Beard Commission” (Hertzberg 1981, 44; Jenness 1990, 130).

Beard’s work on the Commission led him to form another longstanding friendship with another member of the Commission, George S. Counts, who was then a rising figure in the field of education. Counts, at the time of the Commission, was a faculty member at Columbia University where Beard had once worked from 1904 until 1917, who was best known as an

educational theorist with a strong belief in the school as a transformative agency for society writ large (Counts 1934, 3-4). The three, Krey, Beard, and Counts, formed somewhat of a triumvirate in the Commission, or as Krey liked to refer to themselves as the “Soldiers Three” (Krey, 1934b). During the commencement of the AHA Commission, this triumvirate served as the driving force of the Commission’s work as evidenced by their collaborative authorship of the Commission’s controversial summary volume.

The Controversial Summary Volume

The summary volume, published in 1934, was the final installment of the Commission’s sixteen volume study on the social studies. The intent of the volume, as its title *Conclusions and Recommendations* implied, was to summarize the findings of the Commission and provide practical advice for schools with regard to the social studies. Although it was a collaborative effort between Krey, Beard and Counts, it was shaped mostly by Counts due to Krey’s poor health and Beard’s attention to other projects (Dennis 1990, 84-6). The summary volume was clearly colored by Counts’ conceptualization of social reconstructionism. According to Counts, the school, as currently composed, imposed support for capitalist and governmental policies and that schools and teachers should instead impose upon students a commitment to reshape democratic society so that it served the good of the whole rather than only the wealthy or fortunate. This radical philosophy shone through in the summary volume’s second chapter, “frame of reference”, the volume aggressively pushed a collectivist viewpoint. In the chapter, the summary volume boldly declared that “the age of individualism and *laissez faire* in economy and government is closing and that a new age of collectivism is emerging” (Commission on the Social Studies

1934, 16). According to the volume, the emergent social changes commanded the education system to respond accordingly by organizing “a program in terms of a philosophy which harmonizes with the facts of a closely integrated society, it will ease the strains of the transition taking place in actuality” (34). There were several members who, for various reasons, expressed some concern that the summary volume did not adequately represent the Commission’s work. The sternest protest came from The University of Iowa’s Ernest Horn who was perhaps the most prominent education professor on the Commission’s membership roll aside from Counts.

While the summary volume’s emphasis on social reconstruction was a bit problematic to Horn, stating that a “collectivist order” was “too comfortably set up” (Horn 1934, 3), it was the volume’s condemnation of the work of the nation’s education schools that irked him the most. The mid 1920s was a time for innovation in education and Ernest Horn was a key figure in promoting sound, research-based educational innovation. Horn, a professor of curriculum and instruction at Iowa, established The University of Iowa Elementary School which became known for nurturing inquiry-based instruction in its teacher education program. He was a key figure in promoting sound, research-based innovation in education with a primary concern for spelling instruction where he aimed to decipher which words were most commonly used in life outside the school (Stein, 1973). Horn also had a strong interest in social studies education and served as a member of the National Council for the Social Studies. Horn’s work in the AHA Commission culminated in the authorship of a volume of his own for the called *Methods of Instruction in the Social Studies*. Horn’s philosophy of education differed from the triumvirate of Krey, Beard, and Counts in that he emphasized the science of

education in his work. In other words, Horn believed that innovation in educational practice was central to the ascent of the public school's democratic aims. Furthermore, Horn saw the need to nurture innovation in education so as to meet the needs of an ever-changing society. In contrast, the triumvirate focused more on the nature of the subject matter taught in the schools. Horn refused to sign the Commission's summary volume primarily for what he saw as an explicit disrespect for the science of education, most notably its dismissive stance toward objective (multiple choice) testing.

In its fifth chapter, entitled "method of teaching," the summary volume condemned what it called the "sin of pedagogy" in education schools, namely to teach instructional methods separate from subject matter:

During the past generation these institutions have tended to overload their curricula with courses in the mechanics of instruction and administration, have directed their attention too largely to the refinement and super-refinement of techniques, have neglected the more fundamental problems of purpose, thought, value and content and have lamentably failed to co-ordinate training in teaching procedure with scholarship in subject matter (Commission on the Social Studies 1934, 70).

The volume essentially expressed concerns with education being a separate science. The education schools' emphasis on method dissociated with subject matter and the nature of the learner, the volume declared, made education "shallow, formal, or capricious, or all three" (Commission on the Social Studies 1934, 71). These concerns about the education school, whether justified or not, undoubtedly derived from the history professions' long struggle with

the education school for control over the public school curriculum (Novick 1988, 186-7). In fact, the summary volume aimed to put an end to this curricular struggle by proposing to place the training of teachers under the over-arching auspices of the social science departments and that any robust education department should in turn focus on education as a place of "knowledge and thought devoted to the organization and content of knowledge as a focal point in culture" rather than on pedagogy (Commission on the Social Studies 1934, 113).

The summary volume shed light on the beliefs and attitudes of the majority of the Commission members with regard to the education professoriate in general. While these public differences may have made it appear that the members of these separate camps were cold with one another, personal correspondence waffled between a polite, collegial tone to one of a blatant mistrust among their associated fields. For instance, Horn became very upset with the treatment given to the education profession in the summary volume. As the chairman of the Commission, Krey was forced to play the role of arbiter between these disputes and consoled Horn that he should not take the criticism personally:

I think I can give you a good deal of support in insuring a correct interpretation of statements which might otherwise be used to condemn a lot of fine things which you have been doing in Iowa. The condemnation was not of your work. If all the rest of the educational world were doing as fine things as you have been doing in Iowa, there would have been little occasion for much of the condemnation which appears in the document, and the good which you are doing should not be torn down in the wreckage of the general condemnation (Krey, 1934a).

Krey firmly believed that the summary volume was correct in its estimation of the education professoriate. Whether it was political posturing or not, it is clear that Krey viewed Horn as being mired in a personal and professional dilemma when it came to his decision as to whether or not he should sign the summary volume. “He was in the position of being damned if he did and damned if he didn’t”, Krey said in correspondence to Beard.(Krey, 1934c). There is no doubt that Krey saw the education professoriate as lower in quality and less worthy of respect than his own. In a 1933 letter to the historian Conyers Read that focused on the editorial board of the *Historical Outlook*, at the time a premier practitioner’s journal for elementary and secondary history teachers that later became the social studies journal *Social Education*, Krey asserted that George Counts was “the only professor of Education whom I would consider qualified for this editorial board” (Krey, 1933a). A noticeable omission in Krey’s assessment of the education field was Horn despite his long standing efforts in the field of social studies education and worthwhile work in the area of spelling education. While Krey may have spoken sincerely to Horn about his good work in the field of education, he nonetheless viewed it as work in a deeply flawed and nebulous field.

Moreover, Krey’s recommendation of Counts for the editorial board of the *Historical Outlook* likely meant that he viewed Counts’ work in educational psychology and philosophy as mirroring the social science disciplines than that of the education professoriate that he actually belonged to. Horn was proven correct to fear a public confrontation between the educationists and social scientists in the Commission’s deliberations since educationists would “come out

second best in a debate before social science teachers at large” (Horn, 1933). Despite Horn’s professional tact to preserve the civility of the Commission’s deliberations, the publication of the summary volume proved to be a public damnation of the education professoriate that would lead to a notable educationist to directly and publicly challenge the volume’s unabashed criticism of the education field.

The Schism Goes Public

As the summary volume became accessible to the public in the spring of 1934, several media outlets emphasized the significance that the Commission’s concluding statement would have on the educational landscape. *Time* magazine, for instance, quoted the columnist Harry Elmer Barnes who called the summary volume “the most revolutionary and significant document in American education since the days of Horace Mann” (“Surveyor’s and New Society”, 1934). While some media outlets focused on the controversy over objective tests and others on the collectivist stance of frame of reference section, still others ran amuck with its praise for the volume’s condemnatory stance against the education profession. As a case in point, the *Baltimore Evening Sun* declared:

As for the ‘science of education,’ that is probably as inane and dreary a body of pseudo-knowledge as has ever been gathered together. And the rise of scientific pedagogues, the teachers of teachers, and gradual extension of their control until it is now virtually impossible for a would-be teacher to get a job without first submitting to a stipulated number of months of their mumbo jumbo, is a definitely unpleasant story. The tyranny which these pedagogues now hold over the American school system is all but complete. And it

is high time some reputable body should cry out against it (“Challenging the Racket”, 1934).

This public backlash against the education establishment led one of its own, namely Melvin (M.E.) Haggerty, to directly challenge the leader of the Commission who also happened to be his colleague at The University of Minnesota.

M.E. Haggerty was the Dean of the College of Education at Minnesota from 1920 until 1937. Trained as an educational psychologist, Haggerty had dedicated his entire professional career to the development of the education field both at Minnesota and nationwide. As a result he took great offense to the harsh overtone that the Commission’s summary volume pointed toward his profession. In response, Haggerty wrote a pointed letter to Krey. In it he expressed to Krey his resentment toward what he saw as a direct attack on his entire life’s work: “Since this the past volume either directly or by innuendo condemns practically every activity in which I have engaged in the last twenty years” (Krey, 1934d). Haggerty went on to chastise the Commission for what he saw as their lack of academic rigor and objectivity:

The document is a loosely worded discussion that bears all the marks of the kind of propaganda with which, in other fields, the public has become familiar in recent years. Such intellectual challenge as rises from it is clouded in an atmosphere of emotional appeal. The detachment that one expects from sound scholarship is not evident (Haggerty 1935, 274).

He went on to say that “damnation” was accorded in the volume to “almost every endeavor that

during the past half century has been made to improve teaching and to add to our knowledge about education” (275).

Upon reading Haggerty’s pointed letter, Krey complimented Haggerty’s articulation of his concerns stating that “for out of just such serious discussion must arise that clearer understanding toward which all of us strain with whatever strength and wisdom we possess” (Krey, 1934d). While Krey believed Haggerty’s rebuttal of the summary volume was a thoughtful one, he nonetheless remained firm in his disagreement with many of Haggerty’s claims. At the heart of Krey’s rebuttal was an emphasis that the summary volume was intended to be a conclusion and was not designed to provide substantive data to back up findings. Krey was also quick to point out that several volumes in the Commission’s report were yet published and therefore not available for public critique, which may be at the core of some of Haggerty’s concerns. However, later in the letter Krey strayed away from Haggerty’s critique of the summary volume and focused more on the professional concerns brought forth by Haggerty, namely his statement that the summary volume was actually a condemnation of his entire career’s worth of work:

I can recall nothing except the most sympathetic appreciation of my own efforts and aims and the heartiest cooperation between us both in helping to realize our common aims. Such cooperation it seems to me would have been impossible between persons who differed fundamentally and widely as you imply we must – especially over a period of fifteen years more or less (Krey, 1934d).

Krey did not focus on his own personal views of the education professoriate as a whole, but instead focused on his respect for the individual professor as he had done earlier with Horn. "I have always thought that you and I were in fundamental agreement," Krey emphasized to Haggerty, "perhaps more agreed than any other two individuals on the campus" (Krey, 1934d). Knowing that he needed to ensure a positive working relationship with Haggerty, Krey was less harsh in his portrayal of the education profession with Haggerty than he was with Horn, whom he had earlier consoled as being one of the few education professors who was engaged in "fine things" throughout the country (Krey, 1934a). Rather than point out Haggerty as being an exceptional scholar in a deeply flawed field, Krey instead spoke of the turf battle that had haunted the Commission's deliberation and was at the source of their disagreement, namely the "conflict between arts and education or between the academic and the applied fields, especially in education" that he conceded to be "the greatest tragedy in the educational world during the past generation" (Krey, 1934d). Krey proceeded to wash the Commission's hands clean of the claims that Haggerty made against it, saying "partisanship in this matter was in no wise the intent of the Commission" The proverbial olive branch that Krey offered to Haggerty was an admittance that the professional differences between one another's fields was indeed unfortunate: "This schism," Krey conceded, "has hurt both immeasurably" (Krey, 1934d).

Discussion

The schism amongst members of the AHA Commission may be used as case study for a larger and historically rooted schism that took place between the education colleges and the remainder of higher education, particularly the

Arts and Sciences. The summary volume's call to abandon what it called the "science of education" and to reunite education "with the great streams of human knowledge, thought, and aspiration" would not have likely been written by an education professor since it placed the representatives from the field of education in an unenviable position of defending its own existence (Krey, 1934c). However, it was authored by an education professor in George Counts. So, why was the Commission's summary volume so critical of teacher education programs? The answer to that question likely lies somewhere on a spectrum between the changes that were taking place within the field of education and between the field of education and academia as a whole.

The summary volume proposal for education to be a separate field of cultural study rather than as a bastion of pedagogical training may actually be a response to a trend that began to take shape in the early twentieth century when the University of Chicago's laboratory school paved the way of educational innovation. The late nineteenth century saw John Dewey rise to prominence in American culture through his leadership at Chicago, whom he worked for from 1894 until 1904. The University of Chicago, at that time, was very influential in the shaping of teacher training throughout the country since its education department was the "most rounded and comprehensive in the country" (Dykhuizen 1973, 91). Dewey's experimentalist approach toward education was broad, encompassing not only a consideration of the nature of the learner, but also of the subject matter to be taught in conjunction with the general aims of the democratic society. Subsequently, the laboratory school at The University of Chicago served as a model of Dewey's theory of education that was to be a model for the entire nation. However, when

Dewey left Chicago in 1904 for The University of Columbia, the emphasis on experimentalism in Chicago became secondary to its new found emphasis on social efficiency. When Charles Judd became a member of the education faculty at Chicago in 1909, the education department emphasized the science of education, based on survey and research. Under Judd, the field of education came to be viewed as specialized field that was totally separated from subject matter (Herbst 1989, 183-4). This transition of education from a broad field to a specialized vocational field was likely at the root at many of the differences that surfaced amongst the members of the AHA Commission. Interestingly, it was one of Judd's former doctoral students in education, George Counts, who articulated this dissent against the path that Judd had blazed for the field of education. However, Counts' training as a sociologist of education fit more closely with the Deweyian perspective of examining education as a broad field. The fact that Counts was trained by Judd and may have inadvertently undermined the work of his mentor in the summary volume is a curious issue worthy of an investigation in its own right.

While the change in the nature of teacher education likely led to contention between social scientists and educationists, the relatively new site of teacher education may have played a role in the schism as well. It is important to note that the AHA Commission convened at a time when schools of education were first becoming embraced by the university setting when the normal school began its rapid decline toward extinction, as signified by the fact that the total number of normal schools in the United States fell from 170 to 66 and the number of state teachers colleges rose from 46 to 146 between the years 1920 and 1933 (Labaree 2004, 29). "As early as 1915," according to Ellen Lagemann,

"300 of the 600 colleges in the United States offered courses in education, and for the next fifty years, there was unprecedented growth in educational study, especially at the doctorate level" (Lagemann 2000, 20). This inclusion of the education school into the broader university setting brought with it territorial and tribal disparity within academia. Curricular historian Hazel Hertzberg (1981) noted about the Commission that the divisions within it "were not between social scientists and educators but rather between people more directly involved in the world of public affairs and those largely within academia" (53). What Hertzberg failed to realize in her assessment of the Commission was that the a part of the cause for the divisions between the social scientists and educationists was in fact the territorial broach that the practical field of education had made in academia, which at the time was not amiable with fields that focused on the practical over the theoretical. A major concern that the social scientists likely had with the burgeoning field that their fellow commission members represented was that its assimilation into academia served as a peculiar fit in the predominant paradigm in higher education. The education school diverts from most of academia primarily because its curricular focus revolves around the application of practical knowledge to its students whereas academia mostly values theoretical knowledge (Abbott 1988, 54-5; Labaree 2004, 33). Moreover, other members of academia may either ignore or subtly dismiss the education school because its existence infers that the primary job of most professors in academia, namely to teach, requires careful study and professional training. The divisions within the AHA Commission were among the first signs within American academia of an unhappy marriage between the education school and the Arts and Sciences that remains today.

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