

**This Happened in America:  
Harold Rugg and the Censure of Social Studies  
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Abstract: This article provides a brief overview of the Rugg story, but focuses primarily on the Rugg textbook controversy (1939-1941), the firestorm of criticism that led to the demise of the bestselling Rugg social science textbook series and served as a prelude to what was to become a broader and longer lasting series of attacks on progressive education generally, and social studies in particular. In the late 1930s and early 1940s Rugg was censured by a media storm fed by conservative patriotic and business groups who, in an un-American fashion, did not want school children, or their parents for that matter, raising questions about the basic structures of American life and the capitalist economic system. Among the implications discussed is the author's belief that it is especially important to keep alternative visions of social studies alive and to make sure that critics of a liberal or issues-centered curriculum are met with a stout defense.

Harold O. Rugg was one of a small group of leaders of the Progressive education movement centered at Teachers College, Columbia University, and a leader among the Social Frontier group that emerged in the 1930s to argue that schools should play a stronger role in helping to reconstruct the society. He was the author of an innovative and best selling series of social studies textbooks which ultimately came under attack from patriotic and business groups in the prelude to the United States involvement in World War II. The story of his rise and fall encapsulates a significant and central story in the history of American education. The Rugg story reveals a great deal about the direction of schooling in American life, the many alternative roads not taken, and the possibilities for the future.

Rugg's story remains important today chiefly because it reminds us that social studies as a broad and integrated field of study has potential for the development of thoughtful and caring citizens, and that it is possible for a social studies reformer to influence the course of events. Rugg's work had a real impact, not only on rhetoric among theorists but on schools. His work brought an integrated and issues-centered approach to the field and to a large segment of U.S. school children during the 1930s, and thus influenced the education of a generation of U.S. citizens. His textbooks and materials sold millions of copies and ultimately inspired a controversy that changed the course of the curriculum.

Rugg created an avant-garde social studies program which was pedagogically advanced, instructive for those with an interest in issues-centered education and/or in teaching for social justice. He developed an approach that integrated the social sciences and history in an issues-centered program

focusing on understanding and social transformation. To this day his program serves as a useful prototype for a unified social studies program focused on issues and societal problems and aimed at education for social justice.

Rugg envisioned an entire social studies curriculum centered around "The American Problem," and aimed at leading a thousand year march to a "cooperative commonwealth." Rugg's story is a reminder of the potential power of social studies reform -- his materials were pedagogically sophisticated and somewhat daring, and they asked tough questions on topics that need to be addressed in a democratic society: the role of business in controlling government, the role of government in regulating business, the influence of men of wealth and property on the constitution and our form of government, the role of government in providing for the general social welfare, immigration, issues related to racial diversity, the role of the United States in world affairs, and a myriad of others. Furthermore, Rugg's work was built on a thoughtful rationale that combined student interest with social worth—a powerful combination that still has appeal.

The Rugg story is also important today because social studies as a broad, interdisciplinary and issues-centered field is currently endangered: reports on classroom practice find a pattern of instruction focused on content acquisition and a fact-myth-legend approach to history; the revival of history and mania for standards and high stakes tests are increasing an emphasis upon traditional history and narrowing the range of issues and questions discussed in schools.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s Rugg was censured by a media storm fed by conservative patriotic and business groups who, in an un-American fashion, did not want school children, or their parents for that matter, raising questions about the basic structures of American life and the capitalist economic system. The attack on Rugg, on his ideas, textbooks and school materials was perhaps the first major battle of what I have termed "the war on social studies" (Evans 2004). It is a war many educators of progressive mind are still fighting.

Recent literature on Rugg illustrates a continuing interest in the Rugg story and focuses mainly on various aspects of the textbook controversy (i. e., Poland and Boesenberg, 2001; Riley & Slater-Stern, 2002; Zimmerman, 2002). The Rugg textbook controversy is of continuing interest for at least two reasons. It embodied several of the major strands of curriculum reform and influences, and, it was a major watershed in the history of social studies education in this country. As I have argued elsewhere, prior to the Rugg textbook controversy it seemed that reflective

and critical approaches to social studies were in ascendance (Evans, 2004). The Rugg dust up marked the start of a long decline for progressive education and the beginning of a return to the disciplines.

Revisiting Rugg's story will underline several of the main themes of his work and highlight the fact that Rugg was instrumental, a seminal thinker in the world of social studies theory and practice. In short, we can learn a great deal from his rationale, his program, and his experiences, all of which came to a head in the conflagration over the Rugg textbooks.

### **The Rugg Social Studies Program**

Rugg's theory of social studies, which melded history and the social sciences into one continuous course, focused on helping students develop a deeper understanding of the industrialized world. In his initial publication after arriving at Teachers College, Rugg wrote that material should be selected by the criterion of "social worth." To be included in the course material must contribute, "... to an interest in and appreciation of the outstanding 'problems' and 'issues' of contemporary civilization" (Rugg, 1921a, p. 189).

Rugg argued that the vast majority of our people rarely deliberate thoughtfully on political and social matters, and that "critical judgment, instead of impulse, must be the basis upon which our social and political decisions are made." It was, Rugg held, the primary responsibility of the social studies curriculum to provide students with "knowledge about the issues of contemporary life and how they came to be what they are ... translated into tendencies to act intelligently upon them" (Rugg, 1923, p. 1-2).

In the early 1920s Rugg and his entourage developed a series of junior high social science pamphlets which embodied these ideas. The pamphlets were problem-centered and pedagogically advanced: virtually every topic was introduced through a contemporary issue or problem connected to students' lives; the writing was lively and engaging; open-ended discussion questions were prominently featured in "open forum" and "group discussions"; the pamphlets made frequent use of photos, drawings, and cartoons; and, provocative topics were given full coverage, including potentially controversial topics such as the influence of business on government, and the influence of men of property on the development of the U.S. Constitution.

The pamphlets were revised and published in textbook form beginning in 1929. For the ten-year period from 1929 to 1939, the series sold 1,317,960 copies at approximately \$2.00 each, and over 2,687,000 workbooks. Rugg and his associates had

created a unified social studies program and his books attracted worldwide attention and imitation. Through force of will, brilliance, hard work and fortunate timing he had become the leading social studies educator in the United States (Winters 1967). At their peak, the Rugg materials were being used in more than 4,000 school districts nationwide (Bagenstos 1977). The series had become a huge financial success, and represents the zenith of issues-centered social studies materials entrée into classrooms in the twentieth century.

### **The Gathering Storm**

Rugg's writings underwent a shift in the early 1930s with a more pointed advocacy of social reconstructionism and the goal of moving toward some form of "collectivism." It was, in part, these writings and subsequent media coverage of his speaking engagements which attracted the attention of self-appointed censors to Rugg's work. His success as an author, combined with his affiliation with unpopular causes, made him a target for criticism. In 1934, Rugg was listed as a "Communist" in Elizabeth Dilling's (1934) *The Red Network*. During 1935 Rugg spoke out against American Legion attempts to censor a classroom magazine, *Scholastic*, because of its perceived liberal bias. For the balance of the decade, in a series of major speeches, Rugg attacked patriotic societies, the Advertising Federation of America, the National Association of Manufacturers, the United States Chamber of Commerce, and the New Deal itself.

By 1939, against the backdrop of dictatorship and war, controversies over the Rugg textbooks spread like wildfire, and the American public was treated to a spectacle that received continuing national media coverage. The bulk of the attacks came from a combine of business writers and publicists, retired military of the American Legion, professional journalists, and a few loose cannons. The flames were fanned by extensive coverage in the Hearst press.

Bertie C. Forbes, in his own magazine, attacked the Rugg textbooks in an article titled "Traitorous Teachings" in which he charged Rugg with being against private enterprise and urged boards of education to "cast out" the Rugg books (Forbes, 1939). The Advertising Federation of America, led by Alfred T. Falk, attacked the books for carrying "anti-advertising propaganda." Merwin K. Hart, president of the New York State Economic Council, charged Rugg with "making a subtle sugar-coated effort to convert youth to Communism," and suggesting that capitalism "has been a failure and that socialism should be substituted in its place" (Myers, 1940, p. 17).

Controversies over the books in a number of cities and towns followed a typical pattern: a complaint, followed by the appointment of a committee to investigate, then debate and, frequently,

public hearings. In a number of well-publicized cases, Rugg appeared in person to defend the textbook series. The outcome of the controversy varied from place to place. Binghamton, New York, and Englewood, New Jersey, had major controversies covered extensively by local and national media. In a number of cities and towns, including Binghamton, the books were removed. In Bradner, Ohio, the Superintendent ordered the books taken down to the furnace room and burned.

The next round of controversy was generated by two articles which appeared in widely read, nationally circulated magazines. The first of these was an article by Augustin G. Rudd published in the April, 1940, issue of *Nation's Business*, titled, "Our 'Reconstructed' Educational System." Rudd posited that the "entire educational system" had been "reconstructed" with textbooks and courses teaching "that our economic and political institutions are decadent" (Rudd, 1940, p. 27). He blamed the widespread teaching of "social science," ... [instead of] ... history, geography and U. S. Government" and cited the Rugg textbooks as the major culprit. He argued that Rugg "subtly but surely implied a need for a state-planned economy and socialism" and aimed "to undermine the faith of children in the American way of life" (Rudd 1940, p. 94).

The second article, by Orlen K. Armstrong, titled, "Treason in the Textbooks," appeared in the *American Legion Magazine* for September, 1940, and was distributed to one million homes. The article contained a bitter denunciation of the writers and teachers of the "new history," and charged that Rugg sought to "cast doubt" upon the "patriotism" of the founding fathers and the constitution and "to condemn the American system" of private enterprise and inculcate "collectivism" (Armstrong, 1940, pp. 51, 70). Armstrong attacked fused courses like Rugg's and described them as "propaganda for a change in our political, economic, and social order" (Armstrong, 1940, p. 9).

Meanwhile the entire controversy garnered increasing national attention. According to an article in *Time* magazine, by the end of the Spring term in 1940, the Rugg textbooks had been banned from a half-dozen school systems. Critics objected to the Rugg texts, the article reported, "for picturing the U.S. as a land of unequal opportunity, and giving a class conscious account of the framing of the U.S. Constitution" (Book Burnings, 1940, pp. 64-65).

### **The Storm Unleashed**

The next major development in the Rugg story raised the stakes considerably as it involved the activities of the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), a mainstream organization with considerable resources. On December 11, 1940, *The New York Times* reported that the NAM announced that it would initiate a survey of textbooks

then in use in the schools to see if it could find evidence of subversive teaching. Ralph Robey, an assistant professor of banking at Columbia University, and a columnist for *Newsweek*, was hired by the NAM to prepare a series of abstracts of some 800 current social studies textbooks to show the author's attitudes toward government and business.

On Saturday, February 22, 1941, a headline at the top of the front page of *The New York Times* read: "UN-AMERICAN TONE SEEN IN TEXTBOOKS ON SOCIAL SCIENCES: Survey of 600 Used in Schools, Finds a Distorted Emphasis on Defects of Democracy, ONLY A FEW CALLED RED." The article reported that a "substantial portion" of the social science textbooks used in schools "tend to criticize our form of government and the system of private enterprise" (Fine, 1941, p. 1). The article cited the controversy over the Rugg textbooks and noted that several school systems had banned his books from the classroom (Fine, 1941, pp. 1, 6). The story, including the reference to the Rugg controversy, appeared on the front page.

Internal memoranda from the files of the NAM suggest that many in the organization's offices were rather squeamish about the entire enterprise, and feared that it could result in negative publicity for business and the NAM. As it turned out, these worries were well founded. Protests, corrections, and replies to Dr. Robey's findings came quickly. Leaders of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) made immediate contact with leaders of the NAM asking whether it "repudiates or endorses" Robey's statement (Hunt, 1941a). NAM President, Walter D. Fuller responded that Robey's criticisms were his "personal opinion only" (Fuller, 1941). Later, after a storm of stories and editorials in the press, the NAM attempted to further distance itself from the controversy (Hunt, 1941b, p. 328).

### **The Aftermath**

The defense against the attacks on the Rugg textbooks was mounted on several fronts. The Academic Freedom Committee of NCSS issued a statement and prepared "a packet ... on freedom of teaching in the social studies area," which included a 66 page booklet on fending off attacks on textbooks (Curti, 1941). The Council of the American Historical Association asked Professor Arthur M. Schlesinger to draft a statement regarding controversial issues in textbooks. The statement, approved by the Council, gave strong support for the inclusion of controversial questions in "the historical account," and for encouraging a "spirit of inquiry" in young people (American Historical Association, 1941, p. 488).

Rugg himself was undoubtedly the chief advocate for the defense of social studies, and the Rugg textbooks, against the attackers. Numerous friends and colleagues also rushed to his defense. One of the most active groups were the American

Committee on Democracy and Intellectual Freedom (ACDIF, 1941), the Association of Textbook Publishers, and Rugg's associates on the journal *Frontiers of Democracy*. Even John Dewey came to Rugg's defense in an opinion editorial which appeared in *The New York Times* (Dewey, 1940). Dewey defended Rugg on the grounds of intellectual freedom even though he didn't always agree with Rugg's ideas or actions, and clearly did not think of Rugg as a major thinker (Dewey, 1944).

Rugg gave an able defense of his work, and attempted to meet every attack directly, appearing in person whenever it was possible. Rugg's confrontations with his accusers followed a familiar pattern. First, he would be accused of being a Communist, then he would be criticized over his plan for a "socialistic" society in *The Great Technology* (1933). When pressed, critic after critic would admit that they had not read the books. Under siege on every side, Rugg wrote an autobiographical work to tell his side of the story. Based on a confidential memo (Rugg, 1940), *That Men May Understand* was published in April, 1941, and received generally favorable reviews. *Publishers Weekly* endorsed the book and joined Rugg in attacking his critics, accusing Dilling, Forbes, and Hart of working on "the prejudices of the American people" and calling Rugg's book "a vigorous and adequate reply to his critics" (*Publishers Weekly*, 1941, p. 1533).

Discussion of the attacks continued in the professional literature. One article, written by a school superintendent, argued that many of the attacks were part of a deliberate effort to undermine "public confidence in the schools so that school appropriations may be reduced" (Dannelly, 1941, p. 32). Another author provided a larger historical context for the attacks and suggested that they were part of a larger "War on Social Studies" (Gould, 1941, pp. 83-91). The real animus of the critics, he wrote, "is against the whole modern conception of the social studies as a realistic approach to life" (Gould, 1941, p. 90). In opposition to the critics, he argued that young people have "the right to know what the world is all about and to learn what can be done about it" (Gould, 1941, p. 91).

As it turned out, February 22, 1941, the date of the Robey story, was a watershed in the war on social studies. Tension had been building while the movement for integrated social studies and a focus on issues and problems with a meliorist or reconstructionist purpose gathered steam. After the Robey article, the tide turned. By 1943 American Legion officers believed they had ousted Rugg's textbooks from approximately 1500 communities (Shumaker, 1943). By the middle of the decade, the Rugg textbook series had virtually disappeared.

Though he never admitted it publicly or with colleagues, the loss of his textbook series and the leadership and prestige it had given him left Rugg

deeply hurt, largely alone, ostracized from his previous leadership role (Evers, 2003; Alling, 2005). Rugg continued to teach and write but focused on scholarly work and college level textbooks, giving up his efforts to revolutionize social studies in schools. Many years later, Rugg briefly commented on the "diabolical" and "fascist groups" behind the textbook controversy such as Merwin K. Hart and the New York Economic Council. He noted that it was only when extremist groups "got the American Legion to work with them" that they "succeeded, in three years time, in putting my books out of the schools" (Rugg, 1956).

Despite the controversy, Rugg continued to maintain his beliefs, and continued to support education for social reconstruction, though his public profile was forever altered and subdued. On May 17, 1960, Rugg died of a heart attack at his home in Woodstock.

## Reflections

Several questions deserve further comment. Previous reviewers of the Rugg materials have disagreed over the degree to which the textbooks reflected Rugg's social vision. One writer called the text series "quite moderate," and suggests that they did not reflect his "more radical views" (Stanley, 1982). Another pair of authors concluded that, "there can be little doubt that the books clearly echo his own socioeconomic orientation" (Carbone & Wilson, 1995). My own look at the Rugg texts suggests that they were progressive in orientation and relatively moderate in outlook, given the rhetoric of the times. They also contained a great deal of narrative history and dramatic stories well told, as well as stimulating photos and cartoons. They were, decidedly, oriented toward raising serious questions in the minds of students about the social and economic institutions of the nation. Yet they were typical of many progressive texts of the era.

It is also interesting to consider the origins and true nature of the controversy. Though at least one scholar has argued that there was a grassroots rebellion against the Rugg textbooks (Zimmerman, 2002), my research strongly suggests that the movement to oust Rugg's texts from schools was orchestrated by a small group of interconnected critics, led by the American Legion and business leaders. Perhaps a more important question is, What was behind the textbook critics' animus toward Rugg? What would motivate such a sustained, expensive and determined campaign? Criticism of the Rugg social studies textbooks and program materialized from the concerns of several individuals and groups who held a competing definition of "the American way" and a vision of America's future quite different from the one advanced by Harold Rugg and other "frontier thinkers." The American Legion's critics and their campaign against Rugg perhaps best exemplifies this.

Rudd, Marshall, West, Fries, Shumaker, Chaillaux, Armstrong and other Legionnaires had a sincere belief in a traditional and conservative version of the American way, one that lionized America's founders and heroes, one that perpetuated and celebrated the cultural mythology of the nation they loved and had fought for.

It is important to keep in mind that the context of the depression, the advent of the New Deal, the rise of totalitarianism in various forms, and the general tensions generated by all of these factors were instrumental in the focus of critics on social and economic issues in "subversive" textbooks. During the early and middle parts of the 1930s, in the depths of the depression, American capitalism was coming under fire and was seriously questioned like never before. Rugg's books seemed to exemplify that questioning stance. By the late 1930s the context for questioning American institutions, and capitalism in particular, shifted dramatically. What had been permitted during the heights of the nation's economic misery was suddenly out-of-place in a world in which survival itself was in question. Patriotic Americans became more concerned about the threat of subversion. The Rugg textbooks were a convenient sacrificial lamb.

Moreover, the forces supporting educational reaction were well-entrenched, highly organized, and quite powerful. Several of Rugg's critics exemplified and frequently expressed the ideological and cultural fundamentalism that lay behind their attacks. The American Legion had a long history of promoting their fundamentalist view of "Americanism" which stressed a rather extreme faith in traditional American institutions, as if they should remain constant and unchanging, and fear of any perceived threats to the status quo (Gellerman, 1938). An equally strong example of reactionary thought, the *National Republic* magazine, reads as a primer on cultural fundamentalism, supporting traditional American institutions including constitutional representative government, laissez-faire capitalism, Christianity, and traditional education, and opposing any movements "Inimical to American Ideals, Traditions and Institutions." Among these "inimical" movements were socialism, communism, atheism, subversion, and "Ruggism" or any other form of non-traditional social studies.

Aside from the question of its origins and its focus primarily on Rugg, the textbook controversy also raised troubling questions about academic freedom, about the role and influence of textbook criticism, and about the supposed "neutrality" of education on social questions. To be sure, schools and school textbooks had never been neutral. Since the founding of the American common school they had advanced a traditional love of country, support for American institutions, and a conservative patriotism (Elson 1964). One of the questions raised by the

Rugg textbooks was whether schools and textbooks should raise difficult fundamental questions about American structures and institutions? It was clear that many critics did not want alternative or critical ideas presented or discussed in schools. The controversy also raised difficult questions about the fine line between balanced discussion of issues and social criticism, about the relationship between a textbook author's point-of-view and the portrayal of issues and institutions, past and present, contained in texts. Indoctrination of some sort was inevitable, especially in the early grades. But how far should it go, and what were its limits?

The Rugg textbook controversy also brought the social studies wars over curricular issues to the forefront. Critics and patrioteers were unified in their condemnation of the new approach to social studies represented by the Rugg program and textbooks. Instead of an integrated, "omnibus" social studies that opened the door to the social sciences and allowed space in the curriculum for some discussion of critical questions, they wanted a return to traditional history, taught in a traditional manner and centered on developing an appreciation for the American past and a deep love and respect for American institutions.

The Rugg textbook controversy also raised key questions of curricular hegemony. Was the curriculum the sovereign province of teachers, administrators, curriculum supervisors, professors of education, textbook authors and other "experts," was it something to be decided by parents, taxpayers, and the American public, or would it ultimately be controlled, or at least framed or hemmed in, by the most persistent, vocal, well organized and financed critics? To what extent would it be limited by clouds of suspicion, hearsay and innuendo? This question in particular, the question of who controls the curriculum, was deeply related to the broad progressive challenge to give experts increased control in a variety of areas of American life, while at the same time giving the average citizen leverage and access in both political and cultural institutions.

Some years after his retirement, Rugg captured the essence of his attempt to change social studies in schools, suggesting that the schools should insist on a curriculum that asks children, "What do you think?" In reflecting on that question, he mused, "Why, it's revolutionary! ... An authoritarian world will not allow that question to be asked" (Rugg, 1956). In this brief statement, Rugg summarized both the pedagogical move at the very heart of his social science curriculum, and the essence of his critics' perspective.

In the present era, it is especially important to keep alternative visions alive, to nurture deep dreams of justice and fair play, and to make sure that critics of a liberal or issues-centered social studies are met with a stout defense. The attacks on Rugg, and especially

the sustained campaign carried on by the American Legion, present early examples of the power of interest group financing and organization. Recently, the revival of traditional history, supported by similar forms of interest group financing, has had a significant influence on the direction of the social studies curriculum (Evans, 2004; Ross & Marker, 2005; Stehle, 1997; Selden, 2004; Singer, 2005).

Given the interest strong interest among the professoriate in critical and social justice approaches to education, the current context of continuing national support for standards, centralized curriculum making, and high-stakes testing, and the present climate of national and international crisis, it behooves us to be aware of, or be defeated by, the successes, the failures, and the mistakes—the "lessons"—of Harold Rugg.

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