

PHILANTHROPY AND EDUCATIONAL REFORM DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

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In 2001, two executives of the Fordham Foundation, Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Kelly Amis, wrote a guide to what they called high-impact education philanthropy. Entitling their book *Making It Count*, Finn and Amis claimed that they wanted all American children to enjoy educations characterized by high academic standards; great teachers; and strong commitments to developing the personal values, the character traits, and the academic skills appropriate to the twenty-first century. They added that public schools failed to provide such training and that many gifts, such as the \$500 million that Walter Annenberg donated to New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia in 1993, did not bring any lasting changes to those schools. According to Finn and Amis, the philanthropists should have donated the money to initiatives that would have limited or removed the control of locally elected school boards. One such initiative that Finn and Amis recommended was for philanthropists to provide funds to encourage state or national legislators to mandate the use of standardized tests to determine whether students should move through the system or whether teachers should be retained. Such standard based reforms would force schoolteachers to devote class

time helping students master the academic skills to pass the tests. Another strategy that Finn and Amis recommended was to use gifts to reinforce competition through such mechanisms as developing charter schools. In this case, Finn and Amis assumed that, when parents could choose, they would select the best programs for their children. Thus, market type mechanisms would force the public schools to devote more time to basic academic instruction (Finn and Amis 2001, 5, 22-34).

Although Finn and Amis presented their suggestions as advancing democracy, they thought that educational reform took place best when elite groups engineered the changes. A different and more traditional view of democratic change is that public deliberations should direct educational reforms. The noted philosopher, John Dewey, expressed this alternative.

In his book, *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey noted that the growth of nationwide industries and the movement of people into large cities had broken the pattern of local control in a short period of time. These changes had some benefits. For example, he claimed the new industrial society had absorbed large numbers of immigrants. Further, while the

agrarian society had been stable, it threatened to lead to stagnation while the mobility of the urban society promised periodic revitalization. On the other hand, the technical or mechanical progress that had broken down barriers among groups replaced those differences with a uniformity of behavior and action and resulted in a general dispersion of intellectual mediocrity (Dewey 1927, 107-109).

For Dewey, true progress would have to be built on the form of democracy that was unique to the United States. Derived from local town meetings, this model required that the citizens discuss civic problems and decide what course of action to follow. For Dewey, elected schools boards epitomized this model. He explained how the school trustees lived in the communities, held regular public meetings to discuss educational issues, and, in frontier communities, the members of the school committees cooperated to build the schools and to hire the teachers. Although, as cities grew, the state provided oversight for such things as the training of teachers, local control of schools persisted despite increased complexity in social life (Dewey 1927, 112-113).

Although Dewey noted that the modern state had replaced the face-to-face community, he contended that the only answer for public problems was some sort of a return to the ideal of such close personal contact in democratic communities. In returning to the ideal of personal contacts, Dewey recognized the need to retain the benefits of using objective scientific studies to solve social problems. Thus, he thought the answer would be for the citizens to come together to understand the problems they faced and to determine what they should do to solve them. Most important, in such meetings, the citizens would come to understand each other. Thus, the relationships formed in such deliberations could provide means by which the community would find and identify itself (Dewey 1927, 214-219).

Although Dewey did not mention the social survey movement in his essay, historian Barry Karl claimed that the social survey movement followed a pattern that conformed to Dewey's

ideas. Established by the 1900s, the process of social surveys involved three steps. A core group of specialists identified a problem. They called a conference to enlist more aid, to publicize the effort, and to appeal to philanthropists to support the project. With the funds from the philanthropists, the experts would conduct the survey and write a report. They expected reasonable politicians to enact the measures they recommended (Karl 1969).

Philanthropists working during the Great Depression contended that the social survey movement reinforced democracy. For example, writing in 1933, Shelby M. Harrison of the Russell Sage Foundation claimed that the study or survey of social conditions had become indispensable to modern cities, regions, and states as citizens sought to adjust to rapid changes taking place in their communities. According to Harrison, social surveys became popular after the Pittsburgh Survey in 1907 earned distinction for combining the methods and skills of researchers from several different fields to illuminate the problems facing the people in the city. Evidence of how quickly the idea of surveys spread was that, in 1909, Paul Kellogg began a journal, *The Survey: A Journal of Constructive Philanthropy*, dedicated to advancing the movement. Harrison believed that social surveys alerted citizens to problems demanding attention and suggested possible remedies. Thus, according to Harrison, surveys enabled citizens to improve their communities through intelligent democratic deliberations (Harrison 1933).

Herbert Hoover rose to prominence pursuing the ideal expressed in the social survey movement. In 1920, he expressed the faith that surveys could strengthen democracy and solve national problems. Speaking at Johns Hopkins University, Hoover claimed that there were two types of public problems. The first type could be solved by referring to previous experiences or by amassing enough information to reveal a proper course of action. Unfortunately, the second type of problem was too complex to easily solve. In these cases, Hoover felt that the correct judgment could arise out of

informed common discussions guided by national ideals (Wilbur and Hyde 41).

In 1921, Hoover gained national attention by constructing three national surveys to understand the economy and reduce unemployment. These reports expressed the hope that continued fact finding would encourage business and political leaders to cooperate in adopting measures that would maintain economic equilibrium (Conference on Unemployment 1929, xx-xxii).

In September 1929, Hoover met with an advisory group to plan the work of the Committee on Recent Social Trends. This was to be the first time that a comprehensive wide-ranging campaign enlisted the aid of many different social scientists to cooperate in studying the emerging social problems facing the nation. The hope was that this study would provide a coordinated view of the elements of the social life in the nation. By uniting such problems as economics, religion, education, and government, the committee members hoped they could direct attention to the importance of balance among these factors of change (Odum 1933).

Unfortunately, almost immediately after Hoover established the committee to study social trends, the Great Depression began. Although Hoover's surveys of the economy had not predicted the stock market crash, he remained optimistic that social surveys could solve the problems. In December 1929, he noted that citizens criticized him for appointing commissions of social scientists. Instead of promising to appoint fewer such commissions, he thought he should appoint more commissions because the complex nature of the civilization made it essential to discover the truth before leaping into action. If these commissions were filled with experts who volunteered their time to conduct the studies, the country would have the best brains making the best judgments to guide action. Most important, Hoover said that the problems could not be solved by executive action. They required approval by the public, and the commissions

could facilitate forming such consensus (Wilbur and Hyde 1937, 41-42).

It is important to note that although Hoover established these surveys as president of the United States, he thought they were democratic actions rather than executive responses. He stayed away from the commissions once they were organized. He did not fund the commissions, and he expected the experts on them to function independently.

Although educational surveys became popular at the same time that social surveys grew in importance, they worked in somewhat different fashions because educators had adopted these surveys as a means to improve school affairs. For example, in 1938, the National Society for the Study of Education (NSSE) dedicated part two of its yearbook to the scientific movement in education. In the first chapter, Charles Judd described the growth of what he called the school survey movement. Usually focusing on one school district, these studies were often conducted by some prominent expert who came from outside to evaluate something about the district. Many of these studies focused on particular problems such as needed curricular changes or innovations in building facilities (Judd, 1938).

Unlike the educational surveys, social surveys were established by community leaders who wanted to discover and to integrate information about conditions in communities. For example, in chapter twenty-three of the NSSE volume, C. S. Marsh described the ways that social surveys might influence schools. Acknowledging that there were many different types of social surveys, Marsh claimed these tended to consider wide ranging problems such as the care and education of the youth in an area while educational surveys were more limited in their scope. Nonetheless, since social surveys, such as the study of Middletown by Robert and Helen Lynd, included schools within their compass, Marsh believed these social surveys offered some ideas for local educators to follow (Marsh 1938).

In 1925, the American Historical Association (AHA) decided to undertake a study that

was roughly similar to the social surveys. The members of the AHA made this decision because a committee the AHA established a year earlier had found the social studies curriculums in states of chaos in school districts around the country. According to the AHA committee, several educational commissions had made suggestions about the proper organization of the social studies, but these recommendations did not help the teachers face the rapid change in social conditions and the increases in school attendance. As a result, the AHA decided to set up its own commission on the social studies. In 1928, the Carnegie Corporation appropriated funds to support the commission's work (Krey 1932).

In the period from 1932 until 1941, the AHA Commission on the Social Studies published seventeen books aimed at enhancing the teaching of social studies. Made up of the foremost historians, political scientists, geographers, and educators, the commission offered guidance to schoolteachers in the task of forming citizens who would direct a period of momentous social change. Some of those books, such as Merle Curti's *The Social Ideas of American Educators*, Ernest Horn's *Methods of Instruction in the Social Sciences*, and George Counts' *The Social Foundations of Education*, became important texts in college courses for the preparation of teachers. Other books, such as Leon Marshall and Rachel Marshall Goetz's *A Social Process Approach to Curriculum-Making in the Social Studies*, set the pattern of organizing the curriculum around themes or processes common to all societies that has been one of the most popular approaches to the teaching of the social studies.

To decide what the commission would do, the members held extensive discussions. Staff members analyzed courses of study, read textbooks, and made summaries of pedagogical writings. This work provided the basis of the extensive discussions that the commission members had. Charles Beard undertook the first task by using these materials to write *A Charter for the Social Sciences in the Schools*.

The aim of this work was to provide the direction for the rest of the commission's work (Krey 1932).

In *A Charter*, Beard noted that industrialism had caused people to move from farms and move to cities. Since these changes continued to happen rapidly, people could not depend on any specific skill to provide economic security. They had to develop the capacity to adapt. Further, people had to learn to be active participants in a democracy marked by increased planning and intelligent cooperation instead of individual efforts. To Beard this meant that a system of economic planning, expansion of health and insurance systems, and provision of equality of opportunity (American Historical Association 1932).

Although Beard called for increased government control of the economy, reviewers praised *A Charter for the Social Sciences* and readers bought it (Dennis 1989, 57-59). This was not the case two years later when the commission released its conclusions and recommendations although the two works expressed similar ideas.

In the main, the criticisms against the *Conclusions and Recommendations* focused on two issues. One of these was the question of whether the economy was moving toward some form of collectivization. The other was whether the newly developed standardized tests represented educational progress.

When George Counts and Charles Beard wrote the *Conclusions and Recommendations*, they based the statements about the nature of the economy on conclusions found in *Recent Social Trends*. Thus, statements about the end of an era of individualism did not reflect their personal opinions as much as they derived from Hoover's own study. Nonetheless, members of the AHA commission, such as Franklin Bobbitt, who had approved these statements when they appeared in the 1932 version of *A Charter for the Social Sciences* considered them to be wild and unfounded when they appeared in the *Conclusions and Recommendations* (Bobbitt 1934).

The second point of contention was the value of standardized testing. In the *Conclusions and Recommendations*, Beard and Counts had written that new type tests could do positive damage to students' minds and that there was no substitute for older forms of examination or the thoughtful judgments of living teachers. The *Conclusions* contended that the best test of the social science program was the responses students made to social situations throughout their lives (American Historical Association 1934, 100-101).

Ernest Horn had reason to disagree with the view of testing that appeared in the *Conclusions*. In 1937, Horn wrote a volume on the methods of instruction that the AHA commission published. In his book, Horn claimed that tests could help develop a student's understanding if they were built in ways that asked the students to draw some inferences in order to answer the questions. Thus, the view that Horn presented in his volume for the commission was opposite the view that the commission presented in its summary document (Horn 1937, 147-150).

The contradictions that appeared among the various volumes led Hazel Whitman Hertzberg in 1981 to note that the AHA commission had not encouraged reform. Although Hertzberg acknowledged that many social studies curriculum guides quoted the official statements and the different volumes published by the commission, she complained that the reports lacked a central focus. For example, although there were two official commission statements, *A Charter for the Social Sciences* and *Conclusions and Recommendations*, she believed the experts qualified their statements to the point that it was impossible to offer a clear summary. Thus, she added, the commission failed to create a coherent perspective similar to the perspectives found in earlier reports because the experts disagreed with each other (Hertzberg 1981, 50-53).

Hertzberg's criticism may derive from the aim of the social survey movement as described by above. In fact, Beard may have illustrated this point when he wrote his volume

for the commission. He hoped that the AHA commission would create a scheme of objectives and a program of the social studies that it would submit to the public. He trusted that the people would act intelligently and adopt those parts that were most useful to them (Beard 1934, 184-187).

If Hertzberg is correct in her assessment, the AHA commission suffered a fate similar to the one that *Recent Social Trends* endured. Hoover lost office before he could use the report. Although he tried to give it to incoming U. S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the new president refused to accept it (Kennedy 1999, 12-13).

According to Barry Karl, *Recent Social Trends* marked the end of the social survey movement. Since Roosevelt had campaigned against Hoover's policies, he had to repudiate Hoover's ideas of surveys. Instead of using social scientists to conduct surveys that people could debate in public meetings, social scientists in the New Deal turned to justify programs that officials had already begun (Karl 1969).

In a similar way, the idea of curriculum reform as part of a social survey ended with the AHA commission. The comments of Edward A. Krug may illustrate this point. He found that the work of AHA commission wherein a wide range of academic scholars and professional educators cooperated on the AHA commission dispelled the myth that academics did not concern themselves with secondary schools until the Sputnik crisis. He could not find any curriculum effort similar to the AHA commission's until the Sputnik crisis inspired U. S. President Eisenhower to draft legislation that initiate and fund changes in math and science instruction. Thus, according to Krug, the AHA commission's work was the last of its type for several years (Krug 1972, 242-249).

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