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ABSTRACT

This monograph suggests that social studies will be improved if classroom teachers concentrate on mastering concepts rather than facts. It explains how teachers can help students understand events and trends in American history by investigating general concepts such as capitalist institutional development, the interaction of historical circumstances, and basic American values. Specific concepts (defined as tool concepts) which help high school students interpret historical data include culture, custom, mores, values, enculturation, acculturation, culture lag, manifest function, latent function, role, and institution. Questions which can be posed in an inquiry approach in social studies classes stress one or several of these concepts. Sample questions include "how do Americans reach to authority?" "what is the role of the individual in a pre-literate society?" "why do Americans place such a high value on liberty?" and "how has economic development in the United States been influenced by American cultural values?" (DB)

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Raising the Standard of Learning in the Social Studies

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Raising the Standard of Learning in the Social Studies

Robert G. Hanvey

IN 1831, a young Frenchman visiting a United States not much older than himself observed that the Ohio River separated two very different American ways of life. In the journal that was to become so quickly classic, de Tocqueville wrote:

Upon the left bank of the stream the population is sparse; from time to time one descries a troop of slaves loitering in the half-desert fields; the primeval forest reappears at every turn; society seems to be asleep, man to be idle, and nature alone offers a scene of activity and life.

From the right bank, on the contrary, a confused hum is heard, which proclaims afar the presence of industry; the fields are covered with abundant harvests; the elegance of the dwellings announces the taste and activity of the laborers; and man appears to be in the enjoyment of that wealth and contentment which is the reward of labor.¹

The young visitor was not hesitant in explaining the prosperity he found on the right bank; the fundamental cause he saw as the absence of slavery; allied to this was a single-minded drive for material wealth:

The white inhabitant of Ohio, obliged to subsist by his own exertions, regards temporal prosperity as the chief aim of his existence; . . . his acquisitive ardor surpasses the ordinary limits of human cupidity; he is tormented by the desire of wealth, and he boldly enters upon every path that fortune opens to him; . . . his avidity in the pursuit of gain amounts to a species of heroism. . . .²

Writing again of the Northerners, de Tocqueville says:

They are taught from infancy to combat want and to place wealth above all the pleasures of the intellect or the heart. The imagination is extinguished by the trivial details of life, and the ideas become less numerous and less general, but far more practical, clearer, and more precise. As prosperity is the sole aim of exertion, it is excellently well attained: . . .³

It was, indeed, well attained—enough to overwhelm—a generation later, that differently

oriented society whose northern margin was the left bank of the Ohio.

De Tocqueville is long dead and the young economy of the 1830's has come to full maturity. What kind of explanation confronts the young American of today when he is asked to look over his shoulder at the origins of his industrial society. His guide will be a textbook. Listen, as a modern text "explains" the location of the textile industry in New England:

The textile industry centered in New England for a number of reasons. New Englanders had free capital—that is, actual money or credit—which was easily diverted from shipping and trading to manufacturers. The region contained available water power, since many New England rivers had falls or rapids near the coast. There was an abundant supply of skilled labor. It took industry, ingenuity, and thrift for farmers to gain a living from the rocky fields of the region. The land could not support the growing families. Thus many Yankees were ready to move to the factory towns.

A century and a quarter separates de Tocqueville's explanations of American economic phenomena from those of the contemporary author: the distance in time is not, however, the significant one. De Tocqueville throughout his writings on America boldly theorizes on the relation of values to institutions and practices, examines minutely the consequences of the laws, customs, and goals of the several societies which he distinguishes within the national society. He is, in short, much concerned with the relation of culture to observable social phenomena; the latter he explains in terms of the former. What the United States was doing and what it *would* do he sees as springing directly from the attitudes and ideals and institutions characteristic of America.

Textbook writers, of course, are not expected to theorize but to put down what is so patently true that children may be asked with clear con-

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¹ de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, New York: Vintage Books, 1954 Vol. I, p. 376.

² *Ibid.*, p. 378.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 411.

science to engrave it on the memory. And the patent truths dot the unruffled surface of school history, a random scattering of islands, never recognized as the merely visible signs of a vast and articulated terrain lying below.

To explain the early locating of the textile industry in New England in terms of the coincidence of liquid capital, waterfalls, poor soil and unplanned parenthood is like explaining Kentucky whiskey in terms of corn, copper, and coopers. A cultural "terrain" lies below such facts. The commerce that produced the "free capital" rested for its success on an ethic that made profit-making and interest-charging eminently respectable. Waterfalls were simply obstacles to the aborigines of the continent for fifteen thousand years; it required a European technology familiar with the water wheel for fifteen centuries to see a waterfall as "available water power." The "rocky fields of the region" did not produce the industriousness that led the entrepreneurs of New England to speak glowingly of the farm girls so diligently attentive to the power looms; certainly the Calvinists of Pennsylvania had land rich enough; to it they applied an energy that did not abate with the accumulation of wealth. Finally, the readiness to "move to the factory towns" cannot be laid so glibly to the inability of the land to support the "growing families." The completely planned textile towns are lodestones because their builders understood so well the mores and values of the farm families from which labor would have to be drawn. The carefully chartered dormitories, the curfews, the lyceums and libraries, the savings banks, the churches—all testify to keen cultural insight on the parts of the entrepreneurs of Lowell and Lawrence and Chicopee Falls.

The intent here is not to belabor the much maligned textbooks but to suggest, through a gross symptom, the nature of the malaise that affects the social studies. The textbook paragraph is not a reflection on the text but on the *low standard of learning in the social studies*. And while there is something romantic about someone wielding a scythe in an age of the air-conditioned combine, there is also something tragic.

Like a poor nation, however, that becomes aware of its under-development as its neighbors achieve affluence, so the social studies is beginning to be uncomfortably aware of its backwardness. High morale is found today in those curriculum areas where intellectual standards have been recently raised; the social studies teacher

senses the excitement among teachers and students in the natural sciences, the mathematics, the foreign languages.

So an important condition of change—discomfort—exists. Still missing is any consensus as to *direction* of change, for also missing is any clear sense of the problems to be overcome. In the confusion, some reformers urge a "virgin-lands" program, so to speak: (we have been derelict in our attention to certain areas of the earth; a reallocation of attention, the cultivation of new fields, will represent improvement).

Others are satisfied to till the old fields but advocate a more intensive cultivation, smaller plots: (case studies, rich in details, should supplant the superficiality of text treatment).

Old fields or new, survey or case study, it may be that the development of the social studies waits primarily on the use of modern tools. Backwardness of the social studies, this writer would suggest, lies in the *failure to employ modern conceptual and theoretical tools of the social sciences*.

There is, surely, no dearth of things to which the social studies is called upon to pay attention; serious conferences are called to narrow the field. Yet the problem is not *how much*, but *how*. The supposedly scholarly gaze that is finally bent upon selected phenomena has all the innocent assurance of a medieval peasant explaining the winds or the tides—and as much validity. The peasant can be a shrewd observer, note the concurrence of events and suspect their relationship; in a limited sense there will be much truth in his explanation. What the peasant will not have will be the *idea* of gravitation, or the *theory* that embodies the *idea* to suggest the attractive power of the lunar mass. Explanation in the social studies, sans modern concept and theory, is peasant-like: shrewd, associative but folklorish in its simplicity, not adequate to the times.

The up-grading of the high school sciences has hinged on acquainting students with the reality that the working scientist sees, with the names used for the discrete parts and aspects of that reality, with the theories that relate the parts and aspects, with the attitudes and ways that are appropriate to the use of concepts and to the construction of theory. Students in the new biology programs, for example, are confronted with the DNA molecule, ATP, nucleotides—very complicated ideas, still not thoroughly understood, but central to the speculation of the modern biologist. And the speculative nature of the scientists' thought is communicated

candidly enough to the high school student: "It may be that DNA, RNA, and protein; in that order, serve as a significant sequence in many biological reactions." (our italics) What a contrast with the authoritative serenity of "the textile industry centered in New England for a number of reasons...."

The social studies (and I have been talking mostly of the history curriculum that, de facto, is the social studies) lags in its intellectual technology not only behind the social scientist but even behind the educated layman. Words like "culture" and "values" and "personality" are in the public domain. But they are not in the public schools. And, although, as with DNA, RNA, and protein, *culture*, *personality*, and *role* may serve as "a significant sequence," the latter set is simply invisible to the high school history student. Being invisible, it is unavailable as an explanatory tool to be applied to the otherwise inexplicable.

A genuine renaissance will occur in the social studies when modern conceptualizations come into use in the high school classroom. An enriched perception is inherent in the use of new concepts and if they are wisely chosen, new vistas will open up. Explanation of individual and group behavior will no longer be superficial and final, but rich, open, and growing—something not to be retained but to be *attempted*. Students and teachers alike can be exhilarated by the mastery, not of facts, but of conceptual tools that bring new meaning to fact.

Let me suggest a basic set of tool-concepts that enrich the perception and interpretation of historical data:

- culture
- custom
- mores
- values
- enculturation
- acculturation
- culture-lag
- manifest function
- latent function
- role
- institution

These concepts *can* be understood by high

* *High School Biology—Blue Version*, pt. 1 American Institute of Biological Sciences, Biological Sciences Curriculum Study, 1960, chapter 6, p. 5.

* Actually, as is clear in the de Tocqueville passages, cultural explanations are hardly new but they are depressingly unfamiliar in secondary education. Just as the Hopi never revealed except to initiated males the real identity of the masked figures of the ritual dances, so with not dissimilar arrogance our best explanations for social phenomena have been reserved for our "initiates," the fortunate young people who "go to college."

school age students. And, learned in the first few weeks or so of an American History course, they can illuminate that well-trod trail in satisfying ways.

Consider the central question of authority distribution and control. Over and over again, in the matter of national independence, in the state-federal equilibrium, in questions of individual liberties vis-a-vis the general welfare, this presents itself. If one looks for them, there are regularities to be seen. The idea of *culture*—of continuity of response—leads one to look. If central *values* grip men's reason at every point of decision, search them out, suspect some measure of consistency in the varied particulars. Look to other cultures; how, in some pre-literate group, is authority seen, *institutionalized*, reacted to?

Well, first, it can be seen that Americans invest authority in *roles* rather than persons. A whole institutional arrangement sees to it that the person in power has such a delicate grasp on his position that the inclination to confuse the influence of the role with the influence of the person is restrained. Putting it this way is a bit different from saying we are a republic. The latter, of course, can and should be said, too. But where the idea of republic directs the attention to the popular base of power, the former ideas cue us to the pervasive distrust of human nature reflected in our fundamental law, matched by supreme confidence in man's capacity to invent and establish a system of relationships that will leash individual ambition.

Second, it can be seen that although Americans constrain authority, they nonetheless accept it. The contrast usually drawn between American political institutions and others stresses the relative freedom and power of the individual in our society. But cross-cultural comparisons with some of the aboriginal cultures of North America as points of reference show our seemingly unique ideas about power and authority to be simply variations on a very European theme. The Fox Indians, on the other hand, deferred to others only for very temporary and specific purposes; they found their guidance not in any external authority or law but in highly internalized signposts. European culture, generally, calls for externalized authority which communicates and enforces the proscriptions of law and in some instances oversees the every behavior of subordinates. European (and American) values stress *compliance* with *properly-constituted* authority.

Third, the high value that Americans place on *liberty* can be seen with more precision and

from what was irrelevant to what was newly sensed as important.

The high school history teacher who employs the concepts of culture and sub-culture in talking of what the books call "sectionalism" will not conclude the analysis with formulations so pure and obvious that objective questions may properly be culled from them. But that teacher's students will see richer meanings in the "sectional conflict," see perhaps that Southern society was oriented to the attainment of a particular way of life while other parts of the nation were willing to let the way of life emerge as they sought wealth and abundance.

That teacher's students will find that the acculturation concept has particular eye-opening qualities in viewing immigration to the United States and migration within the country; the meaning of politics in a state like Illinois where, in Lincoln's day, people of a middle-South culture met New Englanders and both met the new Irish and German immigrants, is enormously enriched through the use of the idea. The legislature is seen, not as an abstraction in that ritual

exercise where students of government learn "How a Bill Becomes a Law" but as a clearing-house for the acculturative experience; public office is seen, not as a prize for which ambitious and unprincipled men struggle, but as part of the institutional arrangement that makes acculturation orderly.

A few concepts, then, from the social sciences reopen questions closed with too much finality in too many texts, too many classrooms. The inquiry-attitude that should be as honored by the social studies as it is by the natural sciences is given sustenance through their use. National history, seen through the lenses thereby provided, takes on new significance.

High school students can learn the concepts and use them. Once learned, they serve to bring richer meanings to every social observation. If the essence of education is the maximization of valid meanings, then these modern tools serve modern education well. They can, I think, revitalize the so-long enervated social studies, establish anew some sense of competence and importance for a subject whose main function has become the serving of the national ego.

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