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The Social and Educational Thought of Harold Rugg

The Social and Educational Thought of Harold Rugg, by Peter F. Carbone, Jr. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1977. 225 pp. $10.75.

Manifesting a historical as well as analytic approach, Peter F. Carbone, Jr. has provided us with a well-written and well-organized study of a long ignored educator — namely, Harold Rugg. As the book repeatedly points out, Rugg was a popular figure who dedicated himself to not only the child-centered school and to reconstructionism, but also to the educational testing movement associated with Charles Judd and Edward Thorndike. Although Rugg advanced a theory of knowledge which possessed both scientific and intuitive components, one of the main questions which the book raises involves the almost total obscurity which befell Rugg as a result of the demise of progressivism and the emergence of the cold war. Like many other prolific figures such as Morris Cohen and Harold Laski, Rugg's notoriety was soon eclipsed as a result of altered intellectual tastes and social conditions. However, Carbone's book deals with this exasperating phenomenon of intellectual history in merely a cursory way. Aside from stating that Rugg was considered to be a subversive because of his advocacy of a non-exploitative, planning society, the book provides little historical analysis capable of shedding light upon the reasons underlying Rugg's long endured fall from academic grace. As such, this is a problem which is in need of further scholarly treatment; for at times, it appears as if the work of a whole generation of progressive educators has been lost to the changes which a resurgent educational conservatism has provoked.

As Professor Carbone states, Harold Rugg was "a man with a vision." Reacting to the influence of a long line of liberal reformers (such as John Dewey, Charles Beard, Thorstein Veblen, James Harvey Robinson, Way Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, Randolph Bourne and Harold Laski), he came to believe that the school should serve as an instrument of democratic, social reconstruction. Shying away from a direct commitment to Marxism or even democratic socialism, he, nevertheless, believed that the school should help inaugurate a new social order based on rational large-scale planning as well as integrated, creative personalities. Although the critics of educational progressivism would contend that the emphasis on self-expression and growth resulted in an anti-intellectual form of life-adjustment, such an outcome is almost exactly the opposite of what Rugg originally had in mind. Functioning as an adherent of innovators such as Froebel, Pestalozzi and Francis Parker, Rugg believed that solid intellectual and scientific achievement could be promoted by developing the artistic and altruistic tendencies lying dormant within each individual. Considering that the post-World War II world's emphasis upon academic excellence, structure and discipline has triumphed over the more progressive view, the kind of treatment which Carbone offers is sorely needed as a means of balancing what has become an almost one-sided perspective.

In an educational environment overflowing with alienation, dehumanization and student violence, it appears as if Carbone's treatment of Rugg's child-centered approach should be sufficient to win this book a wide hearing. However, Rugg's recommendations for a reconstructed method of education are a response to a social order which is perceived as being in a state of severe crisis. This, then, is the next reason why the reader should find this book to be a source of contemporary perspective and illumination. For contemporary America is in the throes of its worst social and economic crisis since the Great Depression which spawned so much of Rugg's productive effort. Hence, the questions which Rugg raises are also our questions. Although his optimistic support of the power of reason to alter entrenched social relations now appears somewhat simplistic, the modern reader will find Rugg's general orientation to be quite compatible with the emphasis on economic planning which now characterizes so much of our national discussion and debate.

Where does Rugg stand with respect to what certain critics now view as the profoundly conservative strain inherent in progressive thought? Although Rugg is interested in using social control as a means of fostering cooperation and creativity, he does not intend his educational theories and prescriptions to serve as an ideological justification of the corporate state. Emphasing with John Dewey that the school should select the positive aspects of the environment for educational treatment, his texts flatly contradict the contention of scholars such as Michael Katz, Clarence Karier and Paul Violas that progressivism objectively functioned as the ideology of corporate control and hegemony. Although certain members of the corporate community may have applied the notions of problem-solving and adaptation to enhance their own power, it is incorrect to attribute this facet of historical development to anything more than the Social Darwinism which has characteristically pervaded so much of the American scene. On this account, therefore, Carbone's book should help to provide a more balanced

and objective perspective, a perspective which should take note of the contradictions and inconsistencies which characterize so much of human endeavor.

As a student of Emerson and Whitman, Rugg, unsurprisingly was something less than a systematic thinker. Professor Carbone points out that, while adding an intuitive emphasis to the scientific work of pragmatists such as Peirce, James and Dewey, Rugg never developed a philosophy of education in the sense defined by Kingsley Price. Refraining from engaging in a comprehensive analysis of educational terms from a metaphysical, ethical and epistemological point of view, he developed his philosophic reflections in a piecemeal and for the most part eclectic manner. When discussing Rugg's philosophic efforts, Professor Carbone proceeds to employ some of the distinctions advanced by a number of distinguished contemporary analytic philosophers. Referring to the distinctions suggested by men such as Karl Popper and R. S. Peters, Rugg's tendency to historicize moral categories and underrate the importance of reason is perspicaciously brought to the fore. However, Carbone's treatment of Rugg's naturalistic ethics is not without its own snares, for at times, it appears as if Professor Carbone has overextended the distinction separating facts from value judgments. Although judgments cannot be derived from a consideration of the facts as such, it is incorrect to assert that certain hypothetical propositions (such as, "If society wishes to foster cooperation, then private property should be abolished") are unconnected to the reasoning which ultimately results in the formulation and affirmation of moral principles. In a word, the general thrust of naturalistic ethics, after certain analytic modifications, is still left essentially unscathed.

Professor Carbone's book raises a number of other critical points which are worthy of discussion. Along with the fact that Rugg's prescriptions depend on a social order which is probably incapable of supplying the artist-teachers which his thought demands, there arises the additional problem of justifying the radical, socialistic changes which Rugg espouses. However, as Professor Carbone points out, the facts themselves, to use Rugg's own words, do not commit us to anything. Although factual agreement may be secured, opposing interests can still logically argue for different forms of social organization, a fact which is derived from the reality of morally-instated, opposing first principles. Another problem centers about Rugg's use of "an intelligent minority" as the means of attaining needed social readjustment. Being somewhat similar to Jefferson's aristocracy of virture and talent, this conception possesses elitist implications, and as Professor Carbone points out, could provoke a tyranny just as pernicious as the exploitative order which it was intended to replace. Moreover, the problem of leadership for social change is an unresolved dilemma which continually permeates Rugg's ideas on social engineering for democracy.

Although Rugg's conception of the school-centered community, adult educational forums, and social science controversy has not become present day orthodoxy, his influence on the schools in the thirties through his social science curricula has made a permanent impact on the history of American education. However, even if his practical impact was more negligible than it actually was, he would still be of interest; for his views on creativity, personal autonomy and a multi-disciplinary approach to educational foundations are still problems with which contemporary educators must invariably grapple. Moreover, since educational thought is presently experiencing a rebirth of neo-progressivism, we must conclude by saying that Professor Carbone's study of Harold Rugg fills a long endured vacuum in the educational literature. Although scholars like Bowles and Gintis explicitly advocate the replacement of capitalism by socialism, their treatment of an education worthy of a socialist democracy is at best cursory. Moreover, it is necessary to note that much of the educational thought produced by the Communist world fares no better. Therefore, it is safe to say that Professor Carbone's scholarly study of Harold Rugg has provided the educational community with just that kind of information upon which future social reconstruction in no small way depends.

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