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The Socialist Roots of American Education

by John Michael Bodi



In 1889, President Benjamin Harrison appointed William Torrey Harris as U.S. Commissioner of Education, a position he held until 1906. Today, Harris is virtually unknown outside the profession of education administration, and few teachers have heard of



William Torrey Harris.

him. Yet Harris' educational philosophy exerted a powerful influence over the American public school system, one that is still very much in evidence today.

Harris was a follower of the German Socialist philosopher George W.F. Hegel and one of the founders of the Hegelian movement in the United States, known as the St. Louis

Movement. Along with Henry C. Brokmeyer, he established the St. Louis Philosophical Society in the early 1860s, and Harris began publishing and editing the first philosophical journal in America, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, in 1867. Many of his philosophical and pedagogical ideas were explained and elaborated in the pages of this journal.

The aim of the St. Louis Movement was to rationalize every field of activity using Hegelian philosophy as a principle of interpretation. Its founders sought to discover how Hegel's ideas applied and what form they might signify when translated into their own experience. These American Hegelians were effective in using the school as a means for molding the young to their ideas.

Through the work of William Torrey Harris, Hegelian ideas influenced the American educational system. Inherent in Hegelianism is the ideal, the idea that the perfect is knowable if not attainable. Socialism is a natural offshoot of Hegelianism because it gives hope for such an ideal to be realized. An educational system predicated on these principles strives to provide equal chances for all students.

As Commissioner of Education, Harris increased the importance of the position and advocated uniformity among all the nation's schools. In 1891, he lobbied for a bill that would provide federal monies for an "educational fund to aid in the support of public schools in the several states and territories;" in 1900 he proposed the idea of giving Civil Service Examinations to teachers; and in 1905 he suggested Presidential action regarding the issuing of bogus credentials to teachers. Harris thus laid the groundwork for the credentialing process, which is in place today.

Harris supported the kindergarten movement, which had been inaugurated in Germany by Friedrich Froebel. In 1873, with Susan Blow, another American Hegelian, he established the first permanent kindergarten in the U.S. He advocated free universities (so that many more students might have access to higher education) and communal schools, created the graded school, and broadened the curriculum to include the arts and modern history. He was instrumental in shortening the school day and year while at the same time providing more time per subject to be taught. His biggest pedagogical battle, one that he lost, was the movement to teach the "manual arts" (vocational education) in the schools.

In addition to funding the Philosophical Society, Harris became President and eventually Life Director of the National Educational Association (the most influential teachers' union then and now) from 1875 until his death in 1909, and also became President of the National Association of School Superintendents. As President of the NEA, Harris was a permanent member and chairman of what was called "The Committee of Ten." This group, later expanded to fifteen, provided educational leadership for the country at the turn of the century.

As Harris stated, "Ninety-nine out of a hundred people in every civilized nation are automata, careful to walk in the prescribed paths, careful to follow prescribed custom. This is the result of substantial education, which, scientifically defined, is the subsumption of the individual under his species. The other educational principle is the emancipation from this subsumption."

The emancipated individual is the person set free, through education, to solve the problems he/she confronts in his/her lifetime. The student, writes Harris, “must first avail himself of the wisdom of the race, and [then] learn how not to be limited by it.”

A “substantial education” is attained through the use of memory and gives the individual the methods and habits necessary to acquire the fundamentals of knowledge. The student is to “accept the authority of the teacher for the truth of what he is told, and does not question it or seek to obtain insight into the reason for its being so.”

Once an “individual or scientific education” has been acquired, however, the individual may go beyond the authority-based “substantial education.” In Harris’ view the critical problem with individual education is that the student may become “self-conceited” due to the notion that he/she has learned on his/her own without the assistance of a teacher. This causes the student to “drift toward empty agnosticism;” therefore this method of education must be built “on the safe foundations of what has been described as the education of authority.”

According to Harris, “silence, punctuality, regularity and industry are fundamental components of a ‘substantial education,’ as much as the critical study of mathematics, literature, science, and history is a part of the “education of insight.”

Today school systems are regimented and tightly organized, taxpayers and parents want accountability, and teachers and students want to teach and learn. William Torrey Harris believed that we should produce citizens who know how to follow directions, who have been exposed to a certain body of knowledge, and who have begun to understand how to fit into the society. But he also believed that American schools should “level the playing field” and allow children to realize their full potential.

Schooling in America should not just be about Harris’ views on, “silence, punctuality, and regularity” or for that matter the size of school budgets, the power of teacher unions and state-mandated tests. It is far more important, in my view, to revisit and question long-held views about public schooling. Some essential questions to be considered include:

- What should be the purposes for educating our youth today?
- How should we educate children to live in a republic with a capitalist economy?
- What do we want for our children and our society in the future?
- How does (and will) the globalization of trade and technology affect our next generations?

Public education today faces many serious problems that may never be solved without taking drastic action. That is why it is time to radically alter “the system.” Students should be given more autonomy to learn and to experience democracy in action. Real competition where individuals compete interactively (via technology perhaps) across schools, districts, and states could drive the curriculum. The arts should be the underlying basis of all we do. Art should be integrated into all subjects so that each of our citizens would become literate beyond reading, writing and computation. Children and teenagers should problem solve, and compete, and measure themselves (against themselves and others) in positive and productive ways.

Is the purpose of education to learn how to follow the rules? Is it to learn a specific body of knowledge? Is it to understand one’s place in society? If you agree, then Harris’ world view is alive and well, and our schools will never evolve into a learning experience that will prepare our children to: think for themselves, learn how to learn and more importantly be enthusiastic about learning.

—John Michael Bodi is Assistant Professor of Secondary Education