

HISTORY IN THE SCHOOLS OF THE UNITED STATES:
CURRENT TENDENCIES

In the last decade in the United States there has been renewed interest in reinstituting "pure" history and, to some extent in the elementary schools, traditional geography into the school curricula. This development has come primarily at the expense of broadfield social studies offerings and other social science courses. Vocal historians such as Diane Ravitch (Teachers College, Columbia) and Paul Gagnon (University of Massachusetts) as well as influential professional leaders such as William Bennett, former head of the U.S. Office of Education, and Bill Honig, Superintendent of Schools in California, have been leaders in this movement. Influential organizations such as the Bradley History Commission and the National Geographic Society, along with academic societies, have contributed funding to projects and publications that have helped lead school districts into program revisions that may be designated as conservative or traditional. A culminating report sponsored by the American Historical Association and a number of other societies was published by the National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools, entitled CHARTING A COURSE: SOCIAL STUDIES FOR THE 21st CENTURY, in 1989, with offices at 3440 Ordway Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20016.

Much of the foregoing has been a reaction against the curricular experimentation and innovation that followed the era of the Vietnam War, as well as a long-time antipathy to the idea of the social studies on the part of some academics. Initially in the 1970's teachers were swamped with many curricular options growing out of the period of the New Social Studies that some feared would lead to curricular anarchy in the field. The important and interesting point that the current critics and school reformers of the last decade have failed to note is that much of what they feared did not happen in the schools. In spite of the rhetoric and the revisionist writings of that disturbing era and the many new possible substitute offerings for traditional history, the bulk of schools and the majority of programs changed but very little.

If one examines carefully what was going on in most schools during the last twenty years, typical programs held sway and were not characterized by large numbers of radical changes. Under the field designation, "social studies" typical history, geography, and government courses continue to be emphasized.

Meanwhile, public concern over the increasingly uncivic behavior of youth — wild self-indulgence, juvenile crime, teen-age pregnancies, and drug use — led the typical citizen, the school critics, and the academic essentialists to designate a scapegoat. Instead, for example, of identifying malfunctioning families, unequal economic conditions especially for minorities, and the evils permitted by adult society, it was easiest to complain of the failure of the schools. Such blame in the areas of citizenship, character, and ethic development was directed especially at the suspect social studies.

Therein we have the major reasons behind the move to return to history and geography of a traditional nature. These subjects are envisioned as prime promoters of sound values and good citizenship in producing young people who live in terms of time-tested national standards. As a result in many school districts and state curriculum guides there is now indicated a return to a greater emphasis upon conventional history organized in a chronological approach. Fewer topical, thematic, problem-centered, and inter-disciplinary courses are now found. What is missing, however, is any truly valid and reliable proof that regular history and geography offerings produce the attitudes and behaviors that most of us desire. Curricular decisions continue to be "armchair committee" productions based on little, if any, solid research. Indeed, as stated previously, a great number of history, geography, and social studies courses have never deviated far from what the new reformers seek! This, in spite of the fact that numerous student surveys have long revealed serious reaction against typical memo-riter name, date, and event "catalogs" which are designated as history courses and texts. Young people generally do not find typical history and social science offerings to be relevant and worth-while and there is now a danger that they may receive more of the same fare.

The real hope is that history teachers, understanding the situation, will find ways to make their lessons and classes important, timely, and motivational. The need is not for more content but for serious thought in organizing courses, in selecting content and emphases, and in improving methodology. If ever there was a need for creative and intelligent history didactic, it is now!

Richard E. Gross
Stanford University