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Harold O. Rugg: The Censorship of an Educator

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As a prolific author and national figure in education, Harold O. Rugg and the school textbook controversy in which he was involved, are well remembered by the older generation of educational historians, curriculum specialists, and social studies educators. On the other hand, Rugg is unknown or less familiar to today's generation of students in colleges of education. Still, important lessons can be learned from a reflective study of Rugg and the censorship of his social science textbooks. Condemnation of Rugg's work undoubtedly served as a precursor to McCarthy era hysteria that not only affected politics, but public education and other aspects of American society as well.

Certainly, concern about censorship and loyalty remain issues prevalent for educators today. Just recently, a teacher recommendation form from a rural independent school district in Texas included loyalty as one of the categories for which the prospective candidate was to be evaluated. Loyalty to whom and to what? This particular teacher candidate was loyal to socialist ideologies, but that probably was not what the authors of the form had in mind when they created the document. In another small Texas town, the school board discussed the banning of certain books from the curriculum (Greenberger, 1996). Obviously, questions of censorship and issues of teacher loyalty are part of educational discourse, not only in Texas, but in American society today (Brown, 1996). Harold Rugg faced controversy over similar issues, and his experience can help inform the present.

In the nearly forty years since his death in 1960, a substantial amount of secondary literature has examined Harold Rugg's life and work. For example, he is the subject of seven doctoral dissertations, including Peter Carbone's "The Social and Educational Thought of Harold Rugg," (1967), Murry Nelson's "Building a Science of Society: The Social Studies and Harold O. Rugg," (1975), Marion Schipper's "The Rugg Textbook Controversy: A Study in the Relationship Between Popular Political Thinking and Educational Materials," (1979), and Donald Robinson's "Patriotism and Economic Control: The Censure of Harold Rugg," (1983). Each of these dissertations examined a different aspect of Harold Rugg's career, and discussed aspects of the textbook controversy which catapulted Rugg into the national spotlight. Indeed, Rugg himself responded to the controversy in his book, *That Men May Understand: An American in the Long Armistice* (1941). Unquestionably, Rugg's resolute personality exacerbated the controversy which his textbooks attracted.

Biographical Highlights

Harold Ordway Rugg (1886-1960) was born on January 17, 1886, in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. In the course of his professional career from the 1920s through the early 1950s,

he became a prominent and controversial professor of education at Teachers College, Columbia University (e.g., Carbone, 1977 and Nelson, 1975). Rugg's modest upbringing was an unlikely beginning, however, for one who became both professionally and financially successful in the field of education. Furthermore, Rugg's childhood in no way prepared him for the public controversy that later surrounded him.

Although Rugg's parents experienced financial difficulty during his childhood years, Rugg was able to obtain an excellent education. After graduating from Fitchburg's public high school, Rugg began to work in a local textile mill, but quickly became disillusioned with mundane factory employment (Carbone, 1977 and Nelson, 1975). In 1904, he enrolled at Dartmouth College, and in five years, completed a B.S. in civil engineering. Rugg then re-entered the workforce in 1909 as an instructor of civil engineering at James Millikin University in Illinois (Rugg, 1941). His engineering degree, although an atypical background for a future professor of education, clearly influenced his curricular thought. Fundamentally, Rugg believed that careful design always preceded competent teaching (Nelson, 1975).

Because he immensely enjoyed teaching, Rugg decided to continue his studies by enrolling in the graduate school of education at the University of Illinois at Urbana (Rugg, 1941). At Illinois, Rugg was guided by William C. Bagley, one of the foremost educators in the country during the early 1900s. After earning a Ph.D. in education and sociology in 1915, Rugg accepted a position as an instructor at the University of Chicago School of Education (Rugg, 1941 and Carbone, 1977). At this time, schools of education were in their infancy, and the increasing demand for professors caused institutions to bid against one another to fill vacancies (Clifford and Guthrie, 1988). Benefiting from such circumstances, Rugg secured a position just five years later as a professor at Teachers College, Columbia University and educational psychologist at the Lincoln School, the college's experimental school in New York City. Indeed, other University of Chicago colleagues such as George Counts and former students, such as John Roscoe Clark, and even his former mentor William C. Bagley, also moved to Teachers College in these years (Rugg, 1941). The Lincoln school was a laboratory school for testing experimental educational ideas that was operated by Teachers College and partly funded by the Rockefeller family (Rugg, 1941; Cremin, Shannon & Townsend, 1954; Kliebard, 1987). In his position at the Lincoln School, Rugg was able to test and report about the students' successes and problems with an experimental social science curriculum that he began to develop soon after his arrival. Clearly, Rugg's work and relationships at Teachers College catapulted him into national prominence in education circles.

At Teachers College, Rugg worked with many educational leaders. In fact, Lawrence Cremin (1954) reports in *A History of Teachers College, Columbia University* that Rugg was a member of an informal discussion group that met twice a month for dinner and conversation which included John Dewey, William Heard Kilpatrick, George S. Counts, John L. Childs, and Dean William F. Russell. Rugg also became involved in several national organizations such as the National Society for the Study of Education, the Progressive Education Association, the Philosophy of Education Society, the John Dewey Society and the exclusive Cleveland Conference. In addition, Rugg was close friends with Progressive Education Association Director Frederick Redefer who lived in New York City, Teachers College colleagues, Freeman Butts and John Coss, and corresponded with former students and many noted academics, such as Paul R. Hanna of Stanford University.

In addition, Rugg was one of the founders of the National Council for the Social Studies (Nelson, 1995) along with his brother Earle Rugg, who began work on his doctorate in education at Teachers College while Harold Rugg taught there. According to Earle Rugg, "the Eastern boys" Edgar Dawson and Albert McKinley, the Council's first President, soon dominated the National Council for the Social Studies organization, and the Ruggs' played a less prominent role (Nelson, 1995). Nonetheless, Harold Rugg maintained contact with Wilbur Murra, the first executive secretary of the National Council for the Social Studies. Earle Rugg, after graduating from Teachers College in 1924, accepted a position at Colorado State Teachers College, now Northern Colorado University in Greeley, Colorado. Earle Rugg maintained his association with the education program at Colorado State Teachers College for more than forty years and served as its Director of Teacher Education. Earle Rugg, did not experience the controversy that his brother attracted, but maintained correspondence with Harold throughout his life.

Although Murry Nelson and other scholars reported that Harold Rugg served as advisor to only a few doctoral students, at least a half dozen of them worked with him on the production of the social studies pamphlets. They included: Chester O. Matthews, John Hockett, Neal Billings, Hyman Meltzer, James Medenhall and Paul Leonard. Matthews became a professor of education at Kent State University and, later, at Ohio Wesleyan University. James Mendenhall was not only a student of Rugg's but also his nephew. Finally, Paul Leonard became President of San Francisco State University.

Harold Rugg was also a prolific author. Indeed, Rugg's list of publications includes approximately seventy-four books and pamphlets and more than one hundred and fifty journal articles. In fact, Rugg was a regular contributor to *The Frontiers of Democracy* (originally *The Social Frontiers*, the journal of the Progressive Education Association), *Historical Outlook*, *Scholastic*, the *Journal of Teacher*

Education and the Journal of Educational Psychology (for which he served as chairman of the board of editors from 1921-1932) (Nelson, 1975).

Rugg's personal life was filled with as much controversy as was his professional life. He had two sons, one with his first wife, Bertha Melville, to whom he was married from 1912-1940, and another son, Harald, with his second wife, Louise Kreuger, to whom he was married from 1941-1947 (Nelson, 1975). Rugg had no children with his third wife, Elizabeth, to whom he was married from 1947 until his death in 1960. Rugg financially cut off his first son in 1940 because he disapproved of his son's life style. Rugg and his second son, Harald, born in 1942, also became estranged.

The Textbook Controversy

Arguably his most lasting accomplishment, Rugg authored a popular set of social studies textbooks, published from the early 1920s until the early 1940s. The profits from these books brought Rugg tremendous personal wealth. By 1940, however, the Rugg textbooks came under attack by various groups and ultimately fell victim to the criticisms of numerous censors.

The social science pamphlets eventually were published by Ginn and Company and garnered tremendous nationwide circulation (Rugg, 1941). In the first nine years when Rugg and his staff personally oversaw their publication, 75,000 pamphlets were distributed to schools (Kliebard, 1987). From 1929-1939, when Ginn and Company marketed the series under the title *Man and His Changing Society*, 1,317,960 copies of the books were sold in addition to 2,687,000 workbooks (Winters, 1968, p.91). Rugg had chosen Ginn and Company to publish the series because a Dartmouth alumnus and long time friend, Henry H. Hilton, was a partner at Ginn and Company (Nelson, 1975). The circulation of the series dropped precipitously, however, when they became the focus of censure by numerous groups during the early 1940s.

Despite the controversy which developed, the Rugg textbook series was popular in the 1920s and 1930s because it was clearly unique in several ways. First, Rugg initially targeted the middle school social studies market, in which there existed a dearth of materials. With remarkable business savvy, Rugg was able to use contacts at school districts to obtain subscriptions, and hence funding for the series, before the pamphlets were actually written. Second, the ideas expressed in the texts reflected a genuine concern for social reform. In fact, many historians of education claim Rugg was essentially a social reconstructionist (Kliebard, 1987, Nelson, 1975, Carbone, 1977), although he has also been called an experimentalist (Robinson, 1983) and an experientialist (Schubert, 1986). Regardless of labels, one of Rugg's basic tenets was that societal changes must be brought about through the reconstruction of the educational

system. Advocacy of societal change through education was particularly appealing during the Depression years. Nonetheless, Rugg reiterated this theme throughout his life (see e.g., Rugg, 1931, 1941, 1943, 1947).

Certainly, Rugg's textbooks reflected the social ideal of societal improvement through education (Rugg, 1941). For example, various books in the series called attention to the disparity between the rich and poor in the United States, the increase of global interdependence, the changing role of women, the growth of modern technology and industrialization, the treatment of American Indians in westward expansion, the abuses of big business and the history of labor unions, the growth of advertising and commercialism, and the preservation of America's natural resources (Kliebard, 1987, Robinson, 1983, and Nelson, 1975). In addition, Rugg frequently downplayed military battles and sought to have students critically examine political history.

Clearly, Rugg's textbooks reflected a liberal bias which led conservative groups to organize opposition to their use in schools. By 1940, the books became the center of a censorship controversy across the country (Kliebard, 1987, Robinson, 1983, and Nelson, 1975). Critics became numerous. People such as Bertie Forbes, owner of *Forbes* magazine, claimed the books were subversive, un-American and unpatriotic. Although Rugg denied the charges, some viewed him as a Socialist or a Communist. For example, Rugg was listed as a known Communist in Elizabeth Dilling's book *The Red Network* (Robinson, 1983 and Nelson, 1975).

Critics of Rugg's textbooks increased in the late 1930s and early 1940s and included the American Legion, the Advertising Federation of America, the National Association of Manufacturers, the Guardians of American Education, Incorporated, and several Communist Party watchdog organizations. The National Association of Manufacturers led by President, Henning W. Prentis and publicist George Sokolsky, commissioned Columbia University banking professor Ralph Robey to conduct a study of six hundred social studies textbooks, including Rugg's. In his report, *Abstracts of Social Studies Textbooks* (1941), Robey concluded that a substantial portion of the textbooks used in American high schools were critical of the government, derided the system of free enterprise and were characterized by an un-American tone (Nelson, 1975). Clearly, Robey did not allow collegial loyalty to influence his opinions.

The advertising industry also criticized the Rugg textbook series. People such as E. T. Meredith, Jr., general manager of Meredith Publishing Company, indicated displeasure with Rugg's treatment of the advertising industry (Robinson, 1983). In addition, the Advertising Federation of America, among organizations, publicly criticized the Rugg series, particularly a chapter in one of the texts which critically depicted the advertising industry.

Additionally, local school boards in several towns and cities, including Englewood, Mt. Lakes and Wayne, NJ; Los Angeles, CA; Atlanta, GA; Binghamton, Mt. Kisco, and Bronxville, NY; and Philadelphia, PA (Nelson, 1975) voted to censor or to discontinue use of the Rugg textbooks. Initially, Rugg himself attended many of the school board meetings, particularly in nearby Englewood, NJ, in order personally to defend his work. The minutes of these school board meetings reflect the extent of the controversy and how it affected educational policy making on a local level. For example, in Englewood, NJ, the fight over Rugg's textbooks became quite protracted, and the local newspaper highlighted the controversy. Opposition in Englewood was led by Bertie Forbes, owner of *Forbes* magazine, who had been appointed to the Englewood Board of Education in 1939. Harold Rugg faced powerful critics (Nelson, 1975).

Several local and national newspapers devoted attention to the Rugg textbook controversy. *The New York Times* covered the controversy extensively, and particularly reported on the school board meetings at which Rugg confronted his challengers. The *Cleveland Press* provided an account of an actual book burning demonstration which featured the destruction of the Rugg textbooks (Rugg, 1941). Rugg was so angered by the book burnings that he began his defense in *That Men May Understand* with an excerpt from the *Cleveland Press*' report (Rugg, 1941).

In addition, several newspapers and pamphlets carried political cartoons that depicted the Rugg textbook controversy. Most of the cartoons were created by opponents of Rugg and were printed in pamphlets such as "Undermining Our Republic" by the Guardians of American Education, Inc., Augustin Rudd's "Our Reconstructed Educational System" and O.K. Armstrong's "Treason in the Textbooks." In addition, several groups distributed leaflets that solicited members or told readers how to find subversive materials in children's textbooks.

Other organizations, however, defended Rugg's work. They included the National Society for the Study of Education, the National Council for the Social Studies and the Progressive Education Association. In addition, many university professors, such as John Dewey, also defended Rugg's work, not only because they supported Rugg's ideas, but because of a fundamental belief in academic freedom (Nelson, 1981). These defenses, however, were anemic.

Despite Rugg's defense, which he expressed at public forums and in his book, *That Men May Understand*, and even eventual retraction of some of the most damaging charges, the series rapidly diminished in popularity. Ginn and Company discontinued printing the series in 1945. Ironically, the declining popularity of the textbooks did not prevent the Federal Bureau of Investigation from beginning a file on Harold Rugg in 1942 (Nelson, 1981). Indeed, Murry Nelson and

H. Wells Singleton reported to the Society for the Study of Curriculum History in 1981 about FBI surveillance of Rugg along with educators George S. Counts and John Dewey. The FBI file contains miscellaneous records dated from 1929-1963 which included reports, memos and correspondence relating to the investigation of purported subversive activities of Rugg and his colleagues. The material gathered included accusations that Rugg was sympathetic to communism and that he also tried to make students internationalist or "communist minded" (Nelson, 1981, p. 20). Interestingly, the recommendation that Rugg be included in the security index of alleged communists was rejected because of insufficient evidence (Nelson, 1981; Robinson, 1983).

Even the U.S. Congress became involved in the Rugg textbook controversy. The U.S. Senate Committee on Education and Labor and Subcommittee on Education and Labor held several hearings related to the Rugg textbook controversies. A citizens' committee spoke before a Congressional subcommittee and other hearings were also held. In addition a monograph titled *Investigations of Concentration of Economic Power* and a report called *Violations of Free Speech and Rights of Labor* were produced as a result of two other hearings connected to the Rugg textbook controversy.

Undaunted by the controversy Rugg continued to work until 1960. However, the quantity of his work diminished precipitously (Robinson, 1983). Although friends and colleagues disagreed about whether the controversy permanently embittered Rugg, Rugg's experience undoubtedly reflected a nationwide shift in the social studies curriculum. Social reconstruction waned with the coming of World War Two, overcome by a wave of patriotism that swept across the country. Existing institutions, such as colleges of education, were perhaps more insulated from criticism. Nevertheless, the social reconstructionist ideology declined in popularity even in schools of education during the 1950s. Nonetheless, Rugg remained personally committed to the ideas of social reconstruction until his death in 1960.

Conclusion

Although Harold Rugg's name may be fading into distant memory, the relevance of the controversy surrounding his work persists. First Amendment issues of freedom of the press are called to attention, as are damages caused by libel and slander. Even though Rugg was able to defend his work, his name and textbooks became associated with controversy, Communism, and an un-American ideology at a time when patriotism increased. Ultimately, school boards responsible for selecting textbooks became unwilling to purchase Rugg's social studies textbooks despite their previous acclaim. The effects of such political decisions, of course, ultimately are passed on to the children in the U.S. educational system.

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