SECONDARY EDUCATION

The Second Transformation of American Secondary Education

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The past few years have seen a very large amount of public controversy over education in America. The controversy has touched on every aspect and level of education, from nursery school to graduate education, and the spokesmen have represented many different interests and points of view. But the focus of the controversy has been the public high school, its organization and curriculum, and the philosophy of education that governs it. On one side, with many individual exceptions and variations in views, stand the professional educators and their organizations. As the creators and administrators of the existing system, American educators not surprisingly by and large defend it, and while accepting and even initiating specific reforms, tend to justify existing practices, institutional arrangements, and dominant philosophies of education. On the other side, a more heterogeneous body of laymen, college and university professors, politicians and military men have attacked fundamental aspects of secondary education in America. The disputes extend over a broad range of educational issues, but at the heart of the argument is the charge by the critics that the quality of American secondary education is poor, that the time and energies of teachers and students are scattered and dispersed over a great variety of activities and subjects, and that there ought to be far greater emphasis on intellectual training, academic subject matter, and the acquisition of traditional skills and knowledge. Very often, the call for reform is coupled with attacks on the policies and philosophies of professional educators; the critics claim that a watered-down progressive education, doctrines of “life adjustment,” the “child-centered school” and the “education of the whole person” have provided the rationale for an indifference to the acquisition of knowledge and the development of clarity of thought and expression which students gain when held to high standards of achievement in course work centering on the traditional “solid” subject matters of English, history, mathematics and the natural sciences.

The public debate has largely restricted itself to issues internal to education, to the curriculum, to teacher training and certification, and the like. But the forces that most heavily affect developments within education largely lie outside it,

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1 For discussion and analysis of the controversy, and references to representative books and articles about the issues, see Paul Woodring, A Fourth of a Nation (New York: McGraw Hill, 1957), Chapters i–iii. For a very different view of the controversy and the issues, see Myron Lieberman, The Future of Public Education (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), Chapters i and ii.
and are often not reflected in the debates about it. It may be useful to consider some of the historical forces which give rise to the current controversies over secondary education.

The Transformation of America

The Civil War is the great watershed of American history. It stands midway between the Revolution and ourselves, and symbolically, but not just symbolically, separates the agrarian society of small farmers and small businessmen of the first half of the nineteenth century from the urbanized industrial society with its salaried employees that followed. And the mass public secondary school system as we know it has its roots in the transformation of the economy and society that took place after the Civil War.

In 1820, at least 7 out of every 10 Americans in the labor force were farmers or farm laborers. In 1870, farmers still comprised about half the labor force. By 1960, that figure was below 10 per cent. At the same time, the proportion of salaried white collar workers rose from less than 10 per cent in 1870 to nearly 40 per cent today. The proportion of non-farm manual workers in the labor force rose until 1920, leveled off at about 40 per cent since then and has shown signs of falling over the past decade. Thus, there has been a large and rapid growth of a new salaried middle class, paralleled by a large and rapid decline in the proportion of the labor force in agriculture, with the proportions of manual workers rising till about 1920 but relatively constant over the past forty years.

These changes in the occupational structure have reflected tremendous changes in the economy and organization of work. Since the Civil War, and especially in the past fifty years, an economy based on thousands of small farms and businesses has been transformed into one based on large bureaucratized organizations characterized by centralized decision-making and administration carried out through coordinated managerial and clerical staffs.

When small organizations grow large, papers replace verbal orders; papers replace rule of thumb calculations of price and profit; papers carry records of work flow and inventory that in a small operation can be seen at a glance on the shop floor and materials shed. And as organizations grew, people had to be trained to handle those papers - to prepare them, to type them, to file them, to process them, to assess and use them. The growth of the secondary school system after 1870 was in large part a response to the pull of the economy for a mass of white collar employees with more than an elementary school education.

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