

From Tradition and Reform in the Teaching of English: A History.

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The reconstructionist point of view took as its starting point Dewey's observation that "education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform"; its end point was radicalism. George S. Counts challenged the Progressive Education Association in a 1932 address. "Dare Progressive Education Be Progressive?" in which he argued the need for education to emancipate itself from the middle class, reaching for political power to lead the nation to socialism. He argued, too, that indoctrination of students would be a necessary part of the struggle toward the desired goals. The Social Frontier, the major journal of the reconstructionists (with Kilpatrick as chairman and Counts as editor), dealt squarely with the ideological issues raised by such approaches. Founded in October 1934 to give more effective voice to the group, its pages chronicle the increasingly radical rhetoric that eventually split the movement and helped to plunge progressivism as well as the reconstructionists into disfavor, By February 1936, the journal had turned to the rhetoric of class warfare as the means to the collectivism which was the major social goal. In so doing it lost many of its supporters; this was further than even most of the Teachers College group were willing to go."

The social reconstructionists ...had a strong sense of mission and a fervent belief in the power of education as an instrument for good. Though the group to a large extent centered around Kilpatrick, they gave little attention to the specifics of curriculum and method that would have been needed to directly influence current practice. Their accomplishment was instead indirect: they reawakened the social consciousness of the progressive teacher. the belief in reform and progress that had originally given progressive education its name. Certainly the rhetoric of the social reconstructionists was accepted by teachers of English during the early 1930s. Stella Center. of John Adams High School in New York City. assessed "The Responsibility of Teachers of English in Contemporary

American Life" in her presidential address to the 1932 NCTE convention. The responsibilities were broad:

"If tariff walls mount to incredible heights and our political leaders pursue a policy of eighteenth century isolation, it lies especially in the province of English instruction, by a program of reading and discussion. to develop a feeling of world solidarity and to create better international understanding."

Why this was "especially the province of English instruction- was not quite clear; presumably the answer lay at least in part in the long ethical tradition which had most recently been reflected in the work of E. Estelle Downing's NCTE Committee on International Understanding. This committee was reorganized at the same convention and the cause of peace was taken up with renewed zeal. The Council announced that together with the NEA it was "officially sponsoring the peace movement in the schools." Journal articles, convention sessions, and a major first for the Council official resolutions were enlisted in the crusade on which "the future of the world depends."

Yet at the same time teachers of English rejected the call for indoctrination. When George S. Counts challenged the schools to build a new social order, Hatfield agreed editorially that there would indeed be great changes in society during the lives of the students: the proper way to prepare them, however, was by training them to think not by imposing thoughts upon them. And when a few years later a language workbook included an advertisement for a telephone company, John J. DeBoer, assistant editor of the English Journal and long a backer of the peace movement, editorialized on the dangers of propaganda in the schools: "This propaganda in behalf of a private utility is so obvious it would not be alarming were it not typical of other influences more insidious. Pressure groups of various kinds constantly besiege the school and frequently invade the classrooms with viewpoints inimical to public welfare." His answer, like Hatfield's to Counts, was to point out that "Not suppression but exposition should be the guiding principle of American education."

Ultimately, teachers of English rejected the plea of the social reconstructionists because they saw other values implicit in their subject matter. Thus Oscar J. Campbell warned in his 1934 NCTE presidential address that "The greatest danger in such a time as ours is that one's mind may be completely captured by the immediate and pressing. Values which are not obvious are in danger of becoming obscured or lost. Our duties in a rapidly changing world can best be discharged if we remain cognizant of the nature of our subject and of those deeper regions of personality to which it brings life and energy." And two years later Dora V. Smith, addressing the same body in the same capacity, felt it necessary to ask. "Are we willing to give boys and girls a share of the attention we have devoted to English as a subject and to the indisputable claims of the social order?" It was time, in other words, to return attention to the children who had been somewhat out of view since the Depression had begun.