

Dare the School Build a New Social Order?

By George S. Counts

With a New Preface by Wayne J. Urban

Southern Illinois University Press

CARBONDALE AND EDWARDSVILLE

Feffer & Simons, Inc.

LONDON AND AMSTERDAM

Preface

GEORGE COUNTS was a major figure in American education for almost fifty years, from the time of his early publications in the 1920s until his death in 1974. Though he was a noted scholar and teacher, this republication of *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* draws special attention to still another side of Counts's career, his role as a social and political activist. The three parts of *Dare the School* were given originally as speeches in which Counts tried to alert educators to the crisis and challenge of the economic depression of the 1930s and, more importantly, attempted to sketch an educational and political response to that calamity.

Given these circumstances, the urgency and boldness of Counts's words should not be surprising. The following is an example of those qualities:

We can view a world order rushing toward collapse with no more concern than the outcome of a horse race; we can see injustice, crime and misery in their most terrible forms all about us and, if we are not directly affected, register the emotions of a scientist studying white rats in a laboratory. . . . In my opinion,

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Counts, George Sylvester, 1889-1974.
Dare the school build a new social order?

(Arcturus books; 143)

1. Education—Aims and objectives. 2. Education—United States. 3. Educational sociology—United States.

I. Title.

LC191.C6 1978 301.5'6'0973 78-18895
ISBN 0-8093-0878-9

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Arcturus Books edition September 1978

Printed in the United States of America



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the challenges of nature, by shrewd planning and hard work. And the school should show the way.

Yet for all his boldness and optimism, Counts's views were not naïve. He earlier had laid the groundwork for the ideas expressed in *Dare the School* through several careful studies of American education. In *The Selective Character of American Secondary Education* (1922), he documented the failure of the public high school to reduce significantly the unequal distribution of wealth and privilege in American society; in *The Social Composition of Boards of Education* (1927), he demonstrated that school boards were controlled completely by the upper classes; and in *School and Society in Chicago* (1928), he chronicled the struggle of Chicago's teachers and citizens to free their schools from economic domination by élites. The conclusion of every one of these studies—that the school was one of many American institutions that did not work for the ordinary citizen but functioned instead to maintain class distinctions—served as a beginning for the arguments in *Dare the School*.

Counts's belief in the necessity of economic and educational change was strengthened by his studies of Soviet Russia in the late 1920s and early 1930s. He made several trips to Russia, where he came face to face with an immense and diverse nation that was attempting consciously to

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this is a confession of complete moral and spiritual bankruptcy.

Imagine the electrification that these words surely caused in an audience that was probably expecting a dispassionate scholarly address or a speech loaded with platitudes. In contrast with the even tone of most contemporary educational writing and speaking, Counts's call for action was unusually vigorous, even in a time that obviously called for boldness. The effect of Counts's words is demonstrated by the way one group of listeners—the Progressive Education Association—responded: they suspended the remainder of the business of the convention in order instead to ponder and react to Counts's ideas.

Another quality that permeates *Dare the School* is its optimism. Despite the crisis, Counts believed that the depression provided an opportunity to implement educational and socio-economic change in America. This optimism had its roots in Counts's study of American history and his personal experiences as a young boy growing up in rural Kansas. A country which had used the crises of the late 1700s to democratize its political life was capable equally of using the economic depression of the 1930s to extend democratization throughout its social and economic life. America could meet the crisis of the depression in the same way the midwestern farmer handled

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democratize its social, cultural, and economic life, assigning to education a crucial role in that process. Although Counts never saw the Russian experience as a panacea for American problems, he did recognize the importance of the social and educational changes engineered by the Soviets and their usefulness as a laboratory for study by those advocating similar changes in other societies.

Counts's reports on Soviet Russia earned him the epithet of "communist" among some Americans, and his advocacy of social change in *Dare the School* furthered that image. Yet, he was not a communist. Though he did believe that communists should be heard and he published articles by communists in his own journal, *The Social Frontier*, Counts himself never joined the Communist party and never endorsed its platform. In the 1930s and 1940s, he led a battle to expel the communists—because of their totalitarianism—from the American Federation of Teachers. What Counts did believe, a view shared by communists and many liberals, was that economic and social circumstances could be changed. The Great Depression provided the impetus for serious efforts to improve those circumstances; Counts's *Dare the School* was the opening salvo in this battle for change.

Three particular themes in *Dare the School* deserve elaboration because of their importance

in Counts's plan for change as well as for their continuing contemporary importance. The first of these is found in Counts's criticism of child-centered progressives. He argued that their naïve belief in education free of social content was in fact a subtle but effective assent to the status quo because it ignored the reality that all education by necessity has a social dimension. To ignore this was to serve the interests of existing social elites. Thus, child-centered progressives were not social progressives but unwitting social conservatives who masked their social views with child-centered language. The discussion in *Dare the School* about the nature of the child is directed toward exposing that fact.

Beliefs similar in effect to those of the child-centered progressives continue to permeate education, so that Counts's observations are still meaningful today. Versions of personalistic, humanistic, and/or therapeutic psychology; the recent advocacy of children's rights; the cynical and alienated "do your own thing" residue of the failure of the youth movement in the 1960s—all these run the risk, with child-centeredness, of ignoring the social dimension of life and education. In addition, the repeated and always unfilled claims that the school can "solve" this or that social problem—racial and sexual discrimination and vocational preparation come quickly to mind as examples—drive otherwise sensible

Self-actualization
ph. Vert.

educators to the seeming haven of a personalism free of the nasty complexities of social problems. The effect of these movements is that advocates of planned educational and social change are on the defensive while glib sellers of liberation and innovation spout their slogans, collect their grant monies, and wonder why others have become cynical about the efficacy of educational reform.

Given the current cynicism about the school as a reform agency, Counts's formulations about education and change are a welcome tonic, for they avoid the useless extremes of claiming either that the school can do everything or nothing at all in reforming society. Counts skillfully navigated a path between those extremes, noting that though the school was not all powerful, neither was it powerless. He thought that the unique power the school possessed was its ability to formulate an ideal of a democratic society, to communicate that ideal to students, and to encourage them to use the ideal as a standard for judging their own and other societies. If Counts's affirmative answer to his own question *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* seems a romantic ideal it should be noted that this pursuit of an ideal democracy is an appropriate and feasible goal for any educational institution in a society that claims to be democratic.

A second matter of importance is the role Counts assigns to teachers in achieving educa-

tional and social reform. Counts wanted organized teachers to implement both educational reform and the democratization of American society. As members of organized labor and other organized reform movements, teachers could take the lead outside the classroom to implement the democratic ideals they developed and taught within the classroom.)

The vision of organized teachers sparking the labor movement to democratize American life has been at best only partially fulfilled in the four decades since Counts proclaimed the challenge. Teachers and other workers now are organized in unprecedented numbers, but neither organized teachers nor the labor movement as a whole are unambiguous proponents of democracy. While seeking the perfectly proper goal of improved economic benefits and working conditions, organized labor oftentimes works against policies that favor previously disadvantaged groups but which are seen as a threat to those already employed and represented by the labor organization. (Counts's contention that the common origins of teachers would incline them naturally toward the claims of ordinary, economically oppressed Americans has not been fully realized yet. Certain aspects of teachers' origins, as well as their work environments, have made them defensive in the face of claims by the disadvantaged on the schools.)

Despite the uneven record of teachers and

tion of scarcity. In an age of abundance, extreme poverty was unnecessary and cruel. Government's role as an economic regulator was to make certain that extreme inequalities were abolished.

Recent trends in the American economy, particularly in energy and environmental matters, indicate that Counts's expectations for a technologically induced material abundance were overstated. With old energy sources rapidly being depleted and new energy technologies such as solar and nuclear power presenting access and safety problems, Counts's expectations seem out of place. Yet the very dangers and possibilities in the contemporary situation highlight the continuing timeliness of Counts's major economic idea—that of a governmental role in protecting the public interest. Recent energy shortages and environmental disasters have accentuated the injustice of an economic system that fails to consider the public interest and continues to pursue profit with a public-be-damned attitude. Both the ecology and consumer movements have focussed on the need for protection of national resources and the preservation of the population from unscrupulous business exploitation. Counts's advocacy of a strong governmental role in the economy is certainly as appropriate now as it was in the 1930s.

In fact, taken as a whole, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* is as directly related to the

labor in social and political matters, particularly in recent years, the overall achievements of the labor movement and the teachers in it, in the realm of increasing political and economic opportunity for the lower classes, is impressive. Teacher and labor pursuit of unemployment benefits, human welfare reform, the civil rights movements, and many other social and political reforms is impressive. Certainly it is superior to the spotty record of teachers and workers in states where they are not organized. Thus, we can say that working to increase teacher organization, and thereby to increase teachers' potential to participate in democratic reform, certainly is as important today as it was in Counts's time. Were he here now, George Counts certainly would be in the forefront of teacher organization activities, as he was during his life.

A final theme that deserves mention is Counts's idea for reform of the American economy. Counts's belief in democratizing the American economy was firmly in the twentieth-century liberal tradition: government regulation in order to insure protection of the public interest. In turn, this was related to another economic idea, namely, that technological progress had eliminated the scarcity of goods, had provided the conditions for material abundance, and had thereby negated private enterprise's arguments for gross inequalities in wealth premised on the assump-

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educational and social problems of our time as it was to those of the 1930s. This is not to imply that Counts was prophetic in all his ideas, but rather to emphasize that many of his themes and suggestions, with appropriate modifications, still are applicable today because George Counts provided educators in a democracy with a vision and with ideals that endure.

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LIKE ALL simple and unsophisticated peoples we Americans have a sublime faith in education. Faced with any difficult problem of life we set our minds at rest sooner or later by the appeal to the school. We are convinced that education is the one unailing remedy for every ill to which man is subject, whether it be vice, crime, war, poverty, riches, injustice, racketeering, political corruption, race hatred, class conflict, or just plain original sin. We even speak glibly and often about the general reconstruction of society through the school. We cling to this faith in spite of the fact that the very period in which our troubles have multiplied so rapidly has witnessed an unprecedented expansion of organized education. This would seem to suggest that our schools, instead of directing the course of change, are themselves driven by the very forces that are transforming the rest of the social order.

The bare fact, however, that simple and unsophisticated peoples have unbounded faith in education does not mean that the faith is untenable. History shows that the intuitions of such folk may be nearer the truth than the weighty

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and carefully reasoned judgments of the learned and the wise. Under certain conditions education may be as beneficent and as powerful as we are wont to think. But if it is to be so, teachers must abandon much of their easy optimism, subject the concept of education to the most rigorous scrutiny, and be prepared to deal much more fundamentally, realistically, and positively with the American social situation than has been their habit in the past. Any individual or group that would aspire to lead society must be ready to pay the costs of leadership: to accept responsibility, to suffer calumny, to surrender security, to risk both reputation and fortune. If this price, or some important part of it, is not being paid, then the chances are that the claim to leadership is fraudulent. Society is never redeemed without effort, struggle, and sacrifice. Authentic leaders are never found breathing that rarefied atmosphere lying above the dust and smoke of battle. With regard to the past we always recognize the truth of this principle, but when we think of our own times we profess the belief that the ancient roles have been reversed and that now prophets of a new age receive their rewards among the living.

That the existing school is leading the way to a better social order is a thesis which few informed persons would care to defend. Except as it is forced to fight for its own life during times of depression, its course is too serene and un-

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troubled. Only in the rarest of instances does it wage war on behalf of principle or ideal. Almost everywhere it is in the grip of conservative forces and is serving the cause of perpetuating ideas and institutions suited to an age that is gone. But there is one movement above the educational horizon which would seem to show promise of genuine and creative leadership. I refer to the Progressive Education movement. Surely in this union of two of the great faiths of the American people, the faith in progress and the faith in education, we have reason to hope for light and guidance. Here is a movement which would seem to be completely devoted to the promotion of social welfare through education.

Even a casual examination of the program and philosophy of the Progressive schools, however, raises many doubts in the mind. To be sure, these schools have a number of large achievements to their credit. They have focused attention squarely upon the child; they have recognized the fundamental importance of the interest of the learner; they have defended the thesis that activity lies at the root of all true education; they have conceived learning in terms of life situations and growth of character; they have championed the rights of the child as a free personality. Most of this is excellent, but in my judgment it is not enough. It constitutes too narrow a conception of the meaning of education; it

brings into the picture but one-half of the landscape.

If an educational movement, or any other movement, calls itself progressive, it must have orientation; it must possess direction. The word itself implies moving forward, and moving forward can have little meaning in the absence of clearly defined purposes. We cannot, like Stephen Leacock's horseman, dash off in all directions at once. Nor should we, like our presidential candidates, evade every disturbing issue and be all things to all men. Also we must beware lest we become so devoted to motion that we neglect the question of direction and be entirely satisfied with movement in circles. Here, I think, we find the fundamental weakness, not only of Progressive Education, but also of American education generally. Like a baby shaking a rattle, we seem to be utterly content with action, provided it is sufficiently vigorous and noisy. In the last analysis a very large part of American educational thought, inquiry, and experimentation is much ado about nothing. And, if we are permitted to push the analogy of the rattle a bit further, our consecration to motion is encouraged and supported in order to keep us out of mischief. At least we know that so long as we thus busy ourselves we shall not incur the serious displeasure of our social elders.

The weakness of Progressive Education thus

lies in the fact that it has elaborated no theory of social welfare, unless it be that of anarchy or extreme individualism. In this, of course, it is but reflecting the viewpoint of the members of the liberal-minded upper middle class who send their children to the Progressive schools—persons who are fairly well-off, who have abandoned the faiths of their fathers, who assume an agnostic attitude towards all important questions, who pride themselves on their open-mindedness and tolerance, who favor in a mild sort of way fairly liberal programs of social reconstruction, who are full of good will and humane sentiment, who have vague aspirations for world peace and human brotherhood, who can be counted upon to respond moderately to any appeal made in the name of charity, who are genuinely distressed at the sight of *unwanted* forms of cruelty, misery, and suffering, and who perhaps serve to soften somewhat the bitter clashes of those real forces that govern the world; but who, in spite of all their good qualities, have no deep and abiding loyalties, possess no convictions for which they would sacrifice over-much, would find it hard to live without their customary material comforts, are rather insensitive to the accepted forms of social injustice, are content to play the role of interested spectator in the drama of human history, refuse to see reality in its harsher and more disagreeable forms, rarely move outside the

pleasant circles of the class to which they belong, and in the day of severe trial will follow the lead of the most powerful and respectable forces in society and at the same time find good reasons for so doing. These people have shown themselves entirely incapable of dealing with any of the great crises of our time—war, prosperity, or depression. At bottom they are romantic sentimentalists, but with a sharp eye on the main chance. That they can be trusted to write our educational theories and shape our educational programs is highly improbable.

Among the members of this class the number of children is small, the income relatively high, and the economic functions of the home greatly reduced. For these reasons an inordinate emphasis on the child and child interests is entirely welcome to them. They wish to guard their offspring from too strenuous endeavor and from coming into too intimate contact with the grimmer aspects of industrial society. They wish their sons and daughters to succeed according to the standards of their class and to be a credit to their parents. At heart feeling themselves members of a superior human strain, they do not want their children to mix too freely with the children of the poor or of the less fortunate races. Nor do they want them to accept radical social doctrines, espouse unpopular causes, or lose themselves in quest of any Holy Grail. According to their views

education should deal with life, but with life at a distance or in a highly diluted form. They would generally maintain that life should be kept at arm's length, if it should not be handled with a poker.

If Progressive Education is to be genuinely progressive, it must emancipate itself from the influence of this class, face squarely and courageously every social issue, come to grips with life in all of its stark reality, establish an organic relation with the community, develop a realistic and comprehensive theory of welfare, fashion a compelling and challenging vision of human destiny, and become less frightened than it is today at the bogies of *imposition* and *indoctrination*. In a word, Progressive Education cannot place its trust in a child-centered school.

This brings us to the most crucial issue in education—the question of the nature and extent of the influence which the school should exercise over the development of the child. The advocates of extreme freedom have been so successful in championing what they call the rights of the child that even the most skillful practitioners of the art of converting others to their opinions disclaim all intention of molding the learner. And when the word indoctrination is coupled with education there is scarcely one among us possessing the hardness to refuse to be horrified. This feeling is so widespread that even Mr. Luna-

charsky, Commissar of Education in the Russian Republic until 1929, assured me on one occasion that the Soviet educational leaders do not believe in the indoctrination of children in the ideas and principles of communism. When I asked him whether their children become good communists while attending the schools, he replied that the great majority do. On seeking from him an explanation of this remarkable phenomenon he said that Soviet teachers merely tell their children the truth about human history. As a consequence, so he asserted, practically all of the more intelligent boys and girls adopt the philosophy of communism. I recall also that the Methodist sect in which I was reared always confined its teachings to the truth!

The issue is no doubt badly confused by historical causes. The champions of freedom are obviously the product of an age that has broken very fundamentally with the past and is equally uncertain about the future. In many cases they feel themselves victims of narrow orthodoxies which were imposed upon them during childhood and which have severely cramped their lives. At any suggestion that the child should be influenced by his elders they therefore envisage the establishment of a state church, the formulation of a body of sacred doctrine, and the teaching of this doctrine as fixed and final. If we are forced to choose between such an unen-

lightened form of pedagogical influence and a condition of complete freedom for the child, most of us would in all probability choose the latter as the lesser of two evils. But this is to create a wholly artificial situation: the choice should not be limited to these two extremes. Indeed today neither extreme is possible.

I believe firmly that a critical factor must play an important role in any adequate educational program, at least in any such program fashioned for the modern world. An education that does not strive to promote the fullest and most thorough understanding of the world is not worthy of the name. Also there must be no deliberate distortion or suppression of facts to support any theory or point of view. (On the other hand) I am prepared to defend the thesis that all education contains a large element of imposition, that in the very nature of the case this is inevitable, that the existence and evolution of society depend upon it, that it is consequently* eminently desirable, and that the frank acceptance of this fact by the educator is a major professional obligation. I even contend that failure to do this involves the clothing of one's own deepest prejudices in the garb of universal truth and the introduction into the theory and practice of education of an element of

*Some persons would no doubt regard this as a *non sequitur*, but the great majority of the members of the human race would, I think, accept the argument.

obscurantism. In the development of this thesis I shall examine a number of widespread fallacies which seem to me to underlie the theoretical opposition to all forms of imposition. Although certain of these fallacies are very closely related and to some extent even cover the same territory, their separate treatment will help to illuminate the problem.

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I. THERE IS the fallacy that man is born free. As a matter of fact, he is born helpless. He achieves freedom, as a race and as an individual, through the medium of culture. The most crucial of all circumstances conditioning human life is birth into a particular culture. By birth one becomes a Chinese, an Englishman, a Hottentot, a Sioux Indian, a Turk, or a one-hundred-percent American. Such a range of possibilities may appear too shocking to contemplate, but it is the price that one must pay in order to be born. Nevertheless, even if a given soul should happen by chance to choose a Hottentot for a mother, it should thank its lucky star that it was born into the Hottentot culture rather than entirely free. By being nurtured on a body of culture, however backward and limited it may be comparatively, the individual is at once imposed upon and liberated. The child is terribly imposed upon by being compelled through the accidents of birth to learn one language rather than another, but without some language man would never become man. Any language, even the most poverty-stricken, is infinitely better than none at all. In the life