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# PROMOTING ECONOMIC LITERACY THROUGH AMERICAN HISTORY

**Paul W. Coons**

## **I Functional Economic Orientation**

Strange as it might sound to many students, American History need not be a mausoleum. Teachers can make the secondary American History course functional and vital. This responsibility of the social studies teacher is heightened and thrown into bold relief in the case of American History by the simple fact that more youth take American History than any other social study,—a condition that would exist even if the laws of forty-six states did not require its study. The immediate need is to find in American History opportunities for promoting good citizenship commensurate with popular and professional assumptions as to its efficacy. This is not an easy task. Nevertheless, the modern teacher must search for an approach to the study of our national development in terms of the realities of problems faced by today's youth. If this goal can be achieved, there is hope of transforming customary recital of well-known facts into dynamic consideration of the contributions of historical perspective to today's problems.

The vital questions are: Will pupils attain understandings of value in making their way in a world of baffling complexity? Will their appreciation of democratic principles grow? Will skills be sharpened for use in dealing with multiplying media of communication? Will behavior, in and out of school, show growth toward thinking and living as responsible citizens?

Of this total area, the economic aspects of our history form one important sector. There can be analysis of opportunities to highlight the significance of economic factors; delineation of functions of American History in economic education; and cooperative attempts by teachers to imple-

ment these functions. In short, the American History course can be given economic orientation and made a streamlined instrument of economic literacy. Moreover, this can be done without losing sight of the values commonly attributed to the study of history; rather, it is believed that investigation into the historical roots of contemporary economic problems will dignify and invigorate American History as a builder of responsible citizenship.

## **II The Unique Functions of American History in Economic Education**

The key to improvement is held mainly by teachers themselves. When they sense the urgency of the challenge, when they work together in local committees or in workshops to clarify objectives and devise means of implementation in harmony with the realities of classroom situations, there is every reason to believe that economic understandings will emerge from instruction in American History.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in a fundamental sense, it is reasonable to suppose that the whole teaching-learning process will be toned up by the effort.

First, teachers will do well to establish in their own minds the special and unique functions of American History in developing economic literacy. Certain things are marginal, incidental, or irrelevant. Such, for instance, would be the attempt to make history a means of mastering economic theory or of cultivating economic competence, though both might conceivably result. More to be deplored would be the perversion of history to promote loyalty to specific economic traditions and dogmas, for this is incompatible with the democratic process of weighing and evaluating all available facts. Again, advocacy of proposals to reform society belongs in another province beside the history classroom.

With functions of economic education that merit little

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<sup>1</sup> See the following publications of the Joint Council on Economic Education: *The Improvement of Economic Understanding*, pp. 28-32, 1948; *Promoting Economic Literacy Through American History*, 1949.

or no emphasis in American History put aside, a search for valid functions is in order.

First, American History can provide a frame of reference needed for sound perspective on economic problems. Insights into historical origins enable students to rise above nationalistic and partisan levels of dealing with issues. Historical considerations prompt understanding of the interdependence of economic and other factors in social evolution. Trends over a considerable period of our history may be traced with resultant awareness that change, interrelationships, and adjustment of economic institutions to social needs may be recognized as features of a dynamic society. Using American History to develop such understandings provides a base for balanced interpretation of contemporary economic trends. At the same time this is the essence of a sound historical approach.

Secondly, American History by its very nature brings the student to consider the profound impact of the American economy upon the world situation and, conversely, the impact of world economic conditions upon our economy. The tariff, our participation in two world wars, the European Recovery Program, Point Four—these are a few of the items which current history thrusts into the forefront of our thinking. Whatever the political and cultural aspects may be, it is certain that the relation between economic situations will loom large as a key to understanding the new world responsibilities of the United States of the mid-twentieth century.

Thirdly, American History can facilitate awareness that economic situations exert vast influence on the development of political and social history, especially on the character of American democracy. From the founding of the colonies to the era of atomic energy, economic forces have played their part—often the dominant part—in determining the policies of political parties, the scope and character of laws and governmental activity. Democracy, as we know it, has deep economic roots in the opportunities afforded by our

resources, in our agrarian independence, in our labor union growth. Realistic treatment of American History in the classroom cannot avoid emphasis on the social and political contributions of economic developments.

Fourthly, the American History classroom has a moral obligation to confront youth with opportunities to evaluate economic propaganda. Intellectual integrity demands it. Preparation for living in a world where propaganda is as abundant as air, and much denser, demands it. What social studies course is more admirably adapted to providing practice in critical evaluation? Such names as Hamilton and Jefferson, Jackson and Calhoun, McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, Andrew Mellon and Norman Thomas are vivid reminders that conflicting economic views have brought countless Americans into heated clashes in daily conversation as well as in the halls of Congress. Today's youth, who learn to probe into the motives of the protagonists and antagonists of history, will thereby be better able to discern the maneuvers of tomorrow's propagandists.

Granted that history holds a place in general education by virtue of its potentialities as a builder of critical thinking, of sane and wholesome attitudes, and of responsible behavior, it is apparent that the American History teacher plays an important role. Our society has placed in the hands of the common man the power to determine the basic policies that orient our national development. Not only the power to vote, but the power to bargain collectively, the power to influence through educational opportunities, and the power to organize as consumers or to form countless other organizations lie within the grasp of the plain people. Every evidence that today's men and women are determined to hold and wield these powers enhances the significance of the teacher; his role becomes pivotal in a society where every man must learn to think and act as a responsible citizen.

### III Marks of Economic Literacy

Let us appraise more exactly the kind of job that needs to be done. Few would dispute the enumeration of such marks found in the report of a committee of teachers at the New York University-Joint Council on Economic Education Workshop of 1949:

"American History can help a high school student develop understandings, appreciations, and skills leading to sound attitudes and responsible behavior patterns. A student thus affected would bear evidence of the following marks of economic literacy:

1. He understands the importance of economic factors in arriving at political decisions.
2. He understands the interplay of legislation and economic development.
3. He appreciates the characteristics and value of our economic system as compared with other systems.
4. He understands the relationship between inequalities in the distribution of income and social tensions.
5. He understands the development of organized labor.
6. He understands the nature of labor-management relationship.
7. He appreciates the continuing, changing struggle for security.
8. He understands the development of our various forms of productive organizations.
9. He understands how our physical environment influences economic activity.
10. He appreciates the growing need for conserving human and natural resources.
11. He understands how money, banking and credit are vital to our economy.
12. He understands the significance of the development of transportation and communication.
13. He appreciates the part his local community plays in our economic development.
14. He understands the economic interdependence of the peoples of the world.
15. He acquires the ability to locate and use intelligently the media of communication.
16. He acquires a useful economic vocabulary.
17. He acquires the ability to think critically on economic issues and arrive at reasoned judgments."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

#### **IV Establishing Marks of Economic Literacy**

Equally essential and considerably more difficult is the creation of classroom situations and the development of learning experiences which provide practical means to valid ends. A supervisor or a committee of teachers can state goals and functions and suggest implementation; they may even do so to the applause of colleagues. The classroom teacher, however, alone can build class morale and organize and guide learning activities essential to the realization of sound economic understandings and attitudes. In other words, the aim and implementation must be the teacher's own, either original or adopted; furthermore, students will need to see and desire to attain the end of economic literacy.

What, then, can teachers do? One group of classroom teachers that explored the problem suggested that the first task is to acquire a clear motivation for establishing any specific mark of economic literacy; secondly, to scan the field of American History to determine what salient facts may be used, what historical trends may be discerned, in order to attain perspective and straight thinking on the understanding to be developed.

Thus far, the procedure has been to determine the specific goal and its importance and to acquire and assess knowledge drawn from history that puts one on speaking terms with the facts involved. Let it be parenthetically stated that the procedure would probably not be as mechanical as this description may suggest. For instance, much of the motivation might well derive from discussion of facts long after the experience has begun. Likewise, it may be observed that the process thus far has been, if the classroom is democratically organized, a cooperative venture, with students and teacher participating in arriving at a definition of the understanding.

The third step is crucial, for talking about an understanding does not build it into the experience of a person. There must be experiences that are, at least, vitally intellectual. If

they are emotionally stirring, so much the better. But the ultimate goal is social action.

### **What Then Can Teachers Do?**

A quotation from the New York University-Joint Council study will illustrate the procedure with reference to one of the marks of economic literacy :

(MARK) "He appreciates the characteristics of our economic system as compared with other economic systems.

#### (STEP I: MOTIVATION)

Good economic citizenship involves active participation by informed persons who shoulder responsibility because they realize the richness of the American heritage and desire to perpetuate and improve it. Certain characteristics have emerged in the evolution of our system; rights to engage in any business of one's own choice, to invest one's savings, freely to buy and sell, to choose a trade or occupation, to join a labor union, to join with others to determine the role of government in economic activity. Along with these rights go the responsibility to conduct private interests in accord with the public welfare and the responsibility to support policies which would open the doors of opportunity to all.

In a world where the rights of the individual are being threatened by the advance of totalitarianism, it was never more true that 'eternal vigilance is the price of liberty'.

#### Facts of history (STEP II: RESEARCH)

1. People from other lands freely came to the new world to better themselves.
2. The common man in this country has enjoyed a rising standard of living.
3. The constitution provided for the protection of property rights, laying the foundation for subsequent economic as well as political development.
4. Our free society has made it possible for individuals to join together in labor organizations, trade associations, co-operatives and other groups to protect their material welfare.
5. In the twentieth century, the government plays an increasingly important part in promoting the economic welfare of the people.

#### Experiences and activities (STEP III)



1. Through CARE or some other agency, send a relief package to someone in Europe.
2. Study a slum area in your region. What weaknesses of our economic system are indicated? How could they be corrected?
3. In your local community find examples of: capitalists, entrepreneur, cooperative, union shop, competition, government regulation of business.
4. In planning for your own future, which of the Four Freedoms seems the most important?
5. Compare the rights of a citizen in this country with a citizen of a country having a different economic system, in regard to the following items:
  - a. Joining labor unions
  - b. Owning property
  - c. Buying and selling
  - d. Going into business for one's self"<sup>3</sup>

Other practical uses of American History to promote economic literacy are likely to result as teachers commit themselves to this purpose. Meantime, hope that the problem will claim respectful attention is strengthened by the fact that teachers themselves made the above proposals in complete awareness of average classroom situations, of the widespread consecration to textbook teaching, and of curricular prescriptions that, in fact or fancy, tend to stifle creative teaching.

### **What of the Future?**

Several needs appear from any intelligent appraisal of the status of American History in relation to education for economic understanding:

1. To determine the worth of materials thus far offered by the Joint Council on Economic Education, experimentation by teachers in many communities will be invaluable.

Group process may be used within school systems to promote further study. Teacher-training institu-

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

tions are in an especially strategic position to refine and improve approaches and procedures. The effort need to be many-pronged if this evaluation proves valid.

2. The development of social action raises a fundamental question: Shall the chronological treatment of American History be discarded in favor of a problem-centered approach? Studies in the psychology of learning suggest an affirmative answer. On the other hand, the prestige of the formal, chronological organization of historical study is so strong that quick or easy progress can hardly be expected. Perhaps the best that can be anticipated in the immediate future is the moderate conversion of conventional courses to occasional, then increasingly prominent, functional emphasis.

Reorientation involves reconsideration of other factors. As the promotion of economic literacy wins support as a primary objective of instruction in American History, teachers will find themselves questioning content and procedure at many points. Has student interest been awakened and cooperation enlisted in the search for economic literacy? Has the vast array of factual material been subjected to critical evaluation? Have problems been defined so as to develop sound perspective on today's issues? Is adequate attention being given to the interrelationship of political, social, cultural, and economic aspects of historical development? Is critical thinking alerted? Is the study of facts for no other purpose than passing tests receiving proper discouragement? Are students evincing growth in responsible behavior? Our democracy has a large stake in the answers to these questions.

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